Paddy and the Public: Irish Immigrants, New York City, and Mass Culture, 1830-1860

William Patrick McGovern

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PADDY AND THE PUBLIC

IRISH IMMIGRANTS, NEW YORK CITY, AND MASS CULTURE, 1830-1860

A Thesis

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the degree of Master of Arts

By

William Patrick McGovern

May 2010
PADDY AND THE PUBLIC

IRISH IMMIGRANTS, NEW YORK CITY, AND MASS CULTURE, 1830-1860

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This thesis investigates the role of visual images in reflecting and shaping attitudes of the native-born towards Irish immigrants in antebellum New York City. Representations in mass culture, specifically in the popular press and on minstrel sheet music covers, serve as a window into understanding native-born discourses on Irish Americans. Various elements of the Irish immigrant trope are analyzed, including massive immigration, crowding, disease, poverty, drunkenness, violence, public women, labor competition, and political corruption. In addition to visual analysis, gender, environmental, and discourse analysis are applied to representations of Irish immigrants. Taking the study of antebellum nativism in a new direction, this thesis demonstrates that mass culture served as a primary vehicle for the creation and distribution of anti-Irish attitudes, fueled by actual events and circumstances, but also popular opinions and visual imagery.
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Introduction

Irishmen are funny fellows, full of fight, frolic, folly, fun; with humor, rioting, and rollicking; always ready for a drink, a devilment, a knock down, or drag out; they closely resemble sailors in their bravery, nonchalance, and indifference to the future or past; and would they but be persuaded never to allow two men or more to fall on one, they would be some of the very best fellows in the world. As it is, however, they work harder, and are worse paid, therefore, than any other set of men under the sun.

_The Morning Herald, 11 April 1840_¹

The incidence and widespread distribution of unfavorable visual images of Irish Americans, both overtly hostile and seemingly neutral, in later antebellum New York City, reflected popular sentiments and contributed to massive growth of anti-Irish nativism. Photograph-like woodblock-carved images of Irish immigrants depicted the Irish as degenerate in a number of ways, mirroring and spreading a negative popular perception. These artistic renderings of poor and suffering Irish immigrants, which claimed to portray actual events, became the image of the Irishman to New Yorkers. These themes became absorbed into popular culture and expanded upon to create and further separate the Irish American archetype from many native New Yorker’s ideas of social and cultural acceptability. Actual events and tensions wrought by emerging industrialization and urbanization further distorted the Irishman’s image in mass culture.

The negative Irish American archetype, which proliferated in printed images produced by the emergent entertainment industry and in the popular media, became the lens through which New Yorkers viewed their Irish neighbors, and their point of contact with the fastest growing population in their city. The Irish American archetype had been pushed so far outside the acceptable bounds of decency and humanity that New Yorkers felt incapable of connecting

¹ _The Morning Herald_ [New York], 11 April 1840, Iss. 277, col. B.
with the newly immigrated Irish and threatened by their presence. The Irishman was no longer seen as a man. He was immoral poor, drunken, and violent, unable to attain the necessary self-mastery to be considered a real man. Previous scholarship regarding nativism has focused heavily on the role of nativist agitators and organizations, or with face-to-face interactions between native born Americans and Irish immigrants as the cause of nativist dissent. Because both areas of focus largely neglect the appeal and expression of non-nativist popular media and mass cultural forms like visual images published in newspapers and by minstrel stage companies, and their role in reflecting, creating, and transmitting anti-Irish nativist ideals to the general public, this paper will show that these were crucial vehicles of nativism.

French theorist Roland Barthes noted that pictures, drawings and photographs possess two layers of meaning. The first is the denotative, or surface meaning, functioning primarily as mere description. The second is connotative meaning, which is the meaning ascribed to it by its viewer that is not expressly conveyed by the image itself. The secondary meaning of an image depends heavily on the cultural context of the viewer. Often these cultural connotative meanings are so deeply ingrained in the viewer, that they are recognized by the viewer as denotative *prima facie* meaning. In the nineteenth century and following United States, advances in printing enabled media producers to print and distribute drawings, sketches, woodblock engravings, and eventually photographs on a wide scale. Images of Irish immigrants contained various layers of meaning in the eyes of their viewers, including the cursory denotative and culturally contextual connotative meanings. The construction of the Irish American archetype owes much of its existence to the proliferation of such media and popular cultural images.²

The theory implemented in this paper relies heavily on the framework established by two theories working in slightly different contexts: Roland Marchand’s analysis of early twentieth century American advertisements and elements of Vanessa R. Schwartz’s study of fin-de-siecle Parisian mass culture. When employing Marchand’s analytical framework, it becomes clear that imagery in newspapers and on the minstrel stage served as a “Zerrspiegel, a distorting mirror that would enhance certain images.” In this way, images both reflected popular opinion and shaped it. Rather than claiming “hypodermic needle effect,” in which mass culture and popular press elites injected their unmediated beliefs and values into an unquestioning, accepting public, this paper envisions newspapers and the visual imagery published by and about minstrel troupes as the points of social negotiation in which opinions of and attitudes towards Irish immigrants were worked out by the native-born. Representations of Irishmen were subject to the scrutiny of their observers. These observers possessed the ability to accept or reject them wholesale or in part. Similar to the processes described by Schwartz which served to construct early mass culture, newspapers, magazines, and minstrel performance relied on popular support in the form of paying customers, these forms of popular culture had to be responsive to their viewers’ demands. While the power of the popular press and minstrel stage show were significantly constrained by audience reception, they were still extremely influential. The frequent appearance and reproduction of negative Irish American imagery across a variety of mediums helped to form the changing attitudes of their viewers. This produced an archetypal Irish figure whom embodied at any given time a number of attributes likely unsavory to the average antebellum New York resident.3

Many of the anxieties felt by the native-born derived from concrete realities of Irish American existence in New York City. Large numbers of Irish immigrants were indeed disease-prone, willing to sell their labor inexpensively, and impoverished. These situational facts of Irish American life became the focus of popular press and minstrel publications because many native-born were concerned with, and thus interested in, these elements of immigrant experience. Neutral or sympathetic producers of newspapers and stage performance responded to audience interest in these aspects of Irish American life by publishing articles, images, and minstrel pieces which featured them prominently. As these problems of Irish American life in New York City became the focus of popular discourse and popular culture, they became reified as fundamental, rather than situational, qualities of the Irish. In this sense the construction of social problems resulted from popular discourse as much as actual quantifiable issues.

Likewise, viewers who subscribed most strongly to stereotyped beliefs about Irish American immigrants engaged in a form of, what Jon Elster terms, “wishful thinking.” While it is impossible decisively to determine motivation, it seems likely that many native-born believed the Irish to be the source of one or more of their problems (e.g. economic, political, health, moral, etc.) not because the evidence firmly supported this, but rather because they preferred the state of affairs in which an easily identifiable scapegoat – the Irish – was to blame. Anti-Irish sentiments were not “causally grounded in evidence, but [were] . . . sustained by the evidence.” The evidence used to support nativist opinions were the facts of Irish American existence during the antebellum period, such as poverty, high disease and death rates, and need to fill unskilled labor positions. Native-born New Yorkers viewed and produced works of mass culture selectively, highlighting those elements of Irish immigrant life which were the most anxiety-

minstrel performance were far from socially, economically, or politically privileged, they were uniquely situated in terms of their involvement in arguably the most popular working class entertainment form in New York City during the scope of this paper. The analysis of this paper applies Marchand’s treatment of advertisements to newspaper and magazine images, as well as to minstrel sheet music covers.
producing. This selective viewing and “weighting” of features of Irish American life supported the distorted vision of the Irishman produced in mass culture.\textsuperscript{4}

Consumers of mass culture in antebellum New York City came from all social and economic classes. This was true of the producers of culture as well. Most minstrel composers, writers, and performers could be considered straddlers of social and class lines. It was not strange that working-class producers and consumers of popular culture would have subscribed to middle- and upper class ideologies, values, gender constructs, and even anxieties.

Because it seems unlikely that the circulation of these ideas was crudely hegemonic, the formation of antebellum so-called middle-class ideologies were more likely to occur “spontaneously” amongst all of society, even if those beliefs were contradictory to the interests of many of its members. In the case of antebellum New Yorkers social and gendered beliefs were an attempt by members of society to make sense of their lives. These ideologies explained social, class, racial, and gender differences while reinforcing the very system which it explained. Negative opinions of Irish Americans, in this way, served to show why these immigrants faced certain hardships, which was in turn conflated with beliefs about the Irish character.\textsuperscript{5}

This thesis outlines the processes that shaped the building of the Irish American archetype in the three decades leading up to the Civil War. Not all New Yorkers were attracted to anti-Irish nativism for the same reasons, and indeed many New Yorkers, presumably including immigrants themselves, were never compelled to put their anti-Irish beliefs into action, political, social, or otherwise. The commonality of grievances towards Irish immigrants stemmed from the varied individual motivations of diverse socio-cultural groups of native-born New Yorkers. In

\textsuperscript{5} Elster, \textit{Sour Grapes}, 164.
other words, the Irishman depicted in mass culture images was offensive to different groups of people for different, though overlapping, reasons.

The following discussion of the Irishman archetype is divided into three chapters, each dealing with different elements of the Irish-American image. The first chapter examines how concrete structural realities of Irish-American existence, such as massive immigration and disease, were reflected and incorporated into the Irish archetype. Chapter two explores elements of the Irish-American trope relating to personal behavior, such as poverty, alcoholism, violence, and female employment, and the secondary connoted meanings they took on regarding morality, manhood, and womanhood, as well as the threats posed to the native-born by way of an immigrant-corrupted environment. The final chapter discusses the Irishman’s involvement in labor competition and politics, specifically how these aspects of life forced face-to-face interaction between the Irish and native-born which challenged existing tropes, in turn fueling increased efforts by the native-born to reinforce and re-impose the negative tropes. All sections discuss the overarching theme of the mass culture as reflective mirror which reflected popular public perceptions, but also distorted and influenced the public, serving as the primary point of interaction between the native-born and Irish Americans.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, historians, political scientists, and scholars of government policy have expressed great interest in nineteenth-century American nativism. Early works, steeped in now-outdated “Great Man” thinking, focused heavily on individuals and their small groups as the leaders of propaganda campaigns, claiming that these crusades were responsible for the widespread adoption of nativist sentiments. Revisionist historians, like John Higham and David Brion Davis, focused on the American cultural tradition of fear and hostility towards Catholics and unfamiliar groups, such as Free Masons and Mormons, for their interpretations. As much as they differed with each other, both schools of thought suffered
from similar weaknesses. Neither adequately addressed concerns about class and ethnic culture, and both over-relied on a small body of explicitly nativist publications. These lacks spawned attacks from a related field of “New Political Historians,” most prominently Eric Foner and Michael Holt. While addressing these failings in the previous literature, however, their studies tended to focus on only one aspect of nativism – politics – and did not interest themselves in social and cultural nativism. These interpretive schools have laid the groundwork and allowed for the possibility of a fresh look at antebellum nativism.\(^6\)

Political and social nativism of the nineteenth century was slow to gain scholarly attention. Early traditionalist history, ranging from the early twentieth century to mid century, though detailed, proved mainly expository with some degree of questionably drawn conclusions. The seminal work of this era, Ray Allen Billington’s *The Protestant Crusade*, largely covered social nativism. Billington viewed nativism as the product of tightly organized semi-religious groups, which successfully employed anti-Catholic propaganda to foster the growth of political nativism by appealing to both middle and working class Protestants. Additionally, Billington framed nativism as a conflict between American Protestants and immigrant Catholics, glossing over the existence of large numbers of Protestant Irish and German immigrants. Primarily using anti-Catholic publications, he viewed American nativism less as a social movement and more as the successful propaganda campaign led by a small number of individuals and organizations. The electoral success of the Know Nothings, a 1850s nativist political organization, furthered his claims about the effectiveness of nativist groups to convert the general public to their position and form larger nativist organizations. Following Billington’s

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massive volume on American nativism, few scholars saw the need to produce works on the subject for several decades.  

Brewing resistance to Cold War rigidity and the development of widespread social activism in the late 1950s and 1960s prompted many scholars to reevaluate social activism in the past, including nineteenth-century nativism. This revisionist group of historians brought new questions, methodologies, and sources to the study of nativism. Unlike their predecessors, many concerned themselves primarily with the political implications of nativism, although they remained concerned with social nativism. Nativism, viewed less as an organized movement, became interpreted more as a widespread public sentiment and ingrained part of American culture. Among the first to smash the ideas of the previous half century of scholarship were Higham and Davis. Though offering little new in the way of primary sources, these historians set the tone of interpretation of nineteenth century nativism to contemporary times. Higham denied the assertion that nativism was spurred principally by the actions of a select few nativist groups. Instead, nativism derived from a British tradition of anti-Catholicism, xenophobia, and Anglo-Saxon racism. Additionally, face-to-face interactions between immigrants and the native-born helped to encourage ingrained nativist prejudices. Nativism, for Higham, should be viewed as a continuum, with periodic outbreaks of greater nativist expression.  

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Saturated with 1950s-era psychohistory influences, Davis offered a slightly different revision of nativism than Higham, mainly due to ideological differences in which Davis seems to treat the American people at times as a homogenous body. Davis held that Americans adopted European forms of traditional subversion literature, originally the product of the conservative aristocratic and monarchical order, and adapted it to the American system as a reaction to fears, prejudices, and unconscious desires. The two sides of the revisionist school agreed on the British anti-Catholic and anti-foreign heritage, but disagreed as to the causes of its perpetuation.9

Subsequent revisionist investigations of nativism have reached conclusions similar to Higham and Davis despite massive additions of new evidence and methodologies. Revisionist scholars of social and political nativism generally embrace the idea of American nativist continuity. Partly in response to new data and partly due to challenges from New Political Historians, many scholars began to attribute the occasional success of political nativism, especially that of Know Nothingism in the 1850s, to additional causes such as rapid economic changes and urbanization, as well as the popular antislavery sentiments. These changes to the American way of life played out as anxieties over working-class economic competition, pauperism, political competition, criminality, and disease. These explanations were presented alongside the argument that nineteenth century nativism was deeply ingrained within society. Nativism found expression during periods of increased economic competition, industrialization, urbanization, and during the sectional conflict preceding the Civil War, however, it was also sustained between these periods when manifested by opportunistic politicians.10

9 Davis, “Themes of Counter Subversion,” and Higham, Strangers in the Land.
Beginning as early as the 1960s another of scholars began applying social science techniques to the study of political and social history. Although rarely reaching a complete consensus, New Political Historians and many of their readers believed that earlier revisionist interpretations had been dealt a fatal blow. Critics dubbed this new interpretive school ethnoculturalist due to its tendency to focus on issues of ethnicity and culture in studying the rise and fall of political parties. Common arguments made about political nativism, while occasionally noting the American nativist tradition, tended to dismiss revisionist arguments that the success of Know Nothing politics of the 1850s had much to do with actual anti-Catholic or anti-foreign sentiments. Instead, antislavery, frustration with the old parties, and socioeconomic factors brought about the collapse of the Whigs, the rise of the Know Nothings, the collapse of the Know Nothings, and the rise of the Republican Party. This issue is of particular interest to political historians because of its causal relationship to the onset of the Civil War, and to the formation of the current party structure. Historians such as Eric Foner, Michael Holt, Tyler Anbinder, and Bruce Levine have brought a large volume of analytical data to the study of 1850s politics including detailed studies of elections and immigration. Not surprisingly, however, these studies often produce more contradictions than consensus. Scholars such as Foner and Anbinder attribute the rise of the Republican Party to the antislavery leanings of the North. While agreeing that Know Nothingism was not truly a product of widespread nativistic mania, Holt argued that the most important factor to their success was frustration with old parties, and that voting districts where Know Nothings were most successful


In response to revisionist attacks that Know Nothing success was inspired by more than the political vacuum created by the collapse of the Whigs, many New Political Historians adopted a synthesized version of their arguments. Most notably, Anbinder and Levine allow for some degree of cultural nativism to explain the changing electoral success of Whigs, Know Nothings, and Republicans. In the end, the new political line of investigation provides more questions than answers.\footnote{Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery; Levine, “Conservatism, Nativism, and Slavery”; Raymond L. Cohn, “Nativism and the End of Mass Migration in the 1840s and 1850s,” The Journal of Economic History 60, no. 2 (June 2000), 361-83; Ronald P. Formisano, “The ‘Party Period’ Revisited,” The Journal of American History 86, no. 1 (June 1999), 93-120.}

The revisionist social history and the recent trend towards a disproportionate focus on 1850s politics leaves the literature in need of cultural histories on nativism. Although substantial and often well-written, revisionist works of the last two decades have tended to lack new source material. A heavy reliance on the propaganda of organized nativist groups, featured as far back as Billington, dominates the evidentiary landscape. Revisionist work also tends be overly polarized, focusing on either nativist organizers and groups, or on a cultural tradition of nativism. Revisionists allow little space for individual idiosyncrasy, ignoring largely that fact that a wide variety of people were attracted to nativism for a wide variety of reasons. The New Political history, while not so new anymore, advances the greatest volume of fresh evidence.
This evidence, while useful for evaluating the eventual rise of the Republican Party, offers few insights to questions outside that narrow scope.\footnote{Bennett, \textit{The Party of Fear}; Knobel, \textit{‘America for the Americans’}; Higham, \textit{Strangers in the Land}; and David \textquote{‘Themes of Counter Subversion’}. For a recent example of creative cultural history see Williams, \textit{‘Twas Only an Irishman’s Dream}. This work deals less with nativism and more with formation of the Irish American identity.}

A serious reevaluation of nativism as it existed in mainstream discourse, sensitive both to the broader cultural context by which it was shaped, and to the diversity of motivations of those who selectively embraced aspects of nativist thought, brings new insights to the now somewhat stale subject. The transition of the study of nativism from a voluntary association approach to a popular culture approach better explains the pervasiveness of anti-Irish sentiments. The implementation of sources from outside of the nativist press allows fresh insights into the construction of social problems related to Irish Americans. Whereas expressly nativist authors sought to expand and perpetuate anti-Irish feelings, the popular press and minstrel stage sought to capitalize on the anxieties of the public.

Visual imagery from newspapers and other periodicals, and from minstrel sheet music covers capture popular representations of Irishmen in antebellum New York City. In particular, the \textit{New York Herald}, \textit{Harper’s New Monthly Magazine}, and \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper} provide visual representations of Irish immigrants, as well as occasional supplementary textual evidence. All reached large numbers of the New York City population. \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated} Newspaper claimed a circulation of 164,000 in 1860, many of which were New York City residents. By 1840, the \textit{Herald} claimed a daily circulation of 17,000, and asserted that it reached both business and working class audiences. The \textit{Herald}, although not a partisan organ, was a Democratic-leaning newspaper. While the Democratic Party came to rely heavily on Irish immigrants as voting supporters, the \textit{Herald} neither totally accepted nor rejected Catholics.
popularity and readership. James Harper, Harper’s co-founder and editor, was elected mayor of New York City in 1844 on a nativist ticket. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper and Harper’s New Monthly Magazine developed into competitors. Minstrel sheet music covers supply additional insights into popular cultural influences of the construction of archetypal imagery on the minstrel stage. Blackface minstrelsy was the dominant form of popular spectacle in the 1800s, most popular in New York City in the 1840s and 1850s. Minstrel shows occasionally entertained elites, but were primarily working class amusement. The sum of these sources serves as a window into later antebellum nativist visual popular culture and the penny press.\textsuperscript{14}

The popular press and minstrel stage were uniquely situated to capture the evolving discourse about Irish Americans amongst the general public in antebellum New York City. The penny press, beginning in the 1830s, allowed an unprecedented number of Americans access to daily news. The popularity of these newspapers derived from their low cost, as well as their coverage of issues, such as crime, formerly outside of the traditional scope of more expensive political and business-focused newspapers. The explosion of the penny press, including papers such as the New York Herald, was due to its accessibility and responsiveness to mass public interest.\textsuperscript{15}

Images on sheet music covers for minstrel pieces both reflected the existing Irish American archetype, but also mirrored some of the generic conventions of the stage performance. Like the press, the minstrel stage showed a massive increase in its popularity in New York City during the later antebellum period. The willingness of minstrel stage performers


to cover subjects of interest deemed inappropriate to the traditional theater, coupled with its low cost of viewership, helped propel minstrelsy into the position of dominant entertainment form. Both the penny press and the minstrel stage, in an effort to attract and retain customers, successfully reflected, but also shaped because of their telescopic focus on a narrow scope of social problems, popular anxieties present in popular discourse regarding Irish American immigrants.¹⁶

Someone unfamiliar with visual imagery of Irish Americans in the popular press and minstrelsy might expect that characterizations of Irish immigrants would vary drastically depending on the political leanings and affiliations of the newspapers or periodicals in question. Publications such as Harper’s, the New-York Spectator, and other Whig-leaning newspapers and periodicals often were implicitly, if not explicitly, nativist. The Herald, a Democratic-leaning newspaper by contrast, often took a much more sympathetic view of immigrants, including Irish Americans. Minstrel sheet music covers were often the site of ridicule for Irishmen and women, but also were occasionally produced by those sympathetic to the plight facing the Irish both in Ireland and the United States, including Irish expatriates. Surprisingly, however, anti-Irish themes were woven into most representations of Irish Americans, regardless of the ideological affiliations of their producers.¹⁷

In part, antebellum anti-Irish thought was largely a continuation of nativist and anti-Catholic currents deeply ingrained in American life. Anti-Catholicism, hostility toward minority groups, criminals, and poor immigrants, had frequently appeared in the American British colonies. British anti-Catholicism evolved from British nationalism in pre-Colonial times. Many

¹⁶ Lott, Love and Theft, 4-5, 9, 35.
Protestant settlers, whether Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay colony, Quakers in Pennsylvania, or the residents of other colonies, aside from Rhode Island, enacted anti-Catholic legislation. Catholics were not alone in their persecuted state. Other minority groups, such as Quakers (outside of Pennsylvania), and Jews, often found themselves targets of hostility. Following the American Revolution, much of the anti-Catholic legislation disappeared, despite continued popular enmity. New Hampshire and the Carolinas retained laws that prohibited Catholics from holding public office into the nineteenth century. Catholics, Jews, and other religious minorities provided only part of the perceived threat to the American identity. Immigrant criminals and paupers also incited rage and opposition from American colonists and early republicans. The British practice of transporting convicts to the colonies for use as forced labor, the result of the Transportation Act of 1717, incensed colonists fearful of increased crime and spread of disease. The eighteenth century nearly concluded when Massachusetts and New York passed poor laws prohibiting indigents from entering their respective states, and holding their transporters legally accountable. The Alien and Sedition Laws, passed in 1798, lengthened the naturalization process for immigrants from five years to fourteen, as well as other immigration restricting elements. These laws met significant opposition and only several years into the nineteenth century were drastically altered, or ceased to exist altogether.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite hostility in previous generations, the nineteenth century saw an increase in European immigration to the United States, beginning first as a trickle at the close of the War of 1812, building to a crescendo in the 1830s and early 1840s, and eventuating in an unprecedented tidal wave of human migration in the mid-1840s through the later 1850s. Most

immigrants of the 1820s and 1830s came from Germany and Ireland; however, the Irish immigrants tended to be from Presbyterian or Anglican background and of middle-class economic rank. These immigrants aroused little suspicion or resentment. In the 1830s, the Irish immigrant demographic morphed from the former skilled middle-class émigrés to unskilled, mostly Catholic rural peasants. The pace of immigration also quickened, with three and a half million immigrants entering New York City ports in the three decades prior to the Civil War. Nearly two million Irish immigrated to the United States between 1845 and 1860. In 1860 the Irish represented over ten percent of the national population, and nearly forty percent of the total foreign-born population. From less than fifty thousand a year in the 1830s, to a climax of almost two-hundred fifty thousand in 1851 alone, the Irish arrival became a part of daily life in American cities. The New York City population more than quintupled between 1830 and 1860.19

The integration of new Irish immigrants into American cities proved far from tranquil. Growing anti-Catholic sentiments, inflamed by ongoing public debate occasionally turned violent. Boston was the site of a days-long assault on Catholic residents and property in 1829. St. Mary’s Catholic Church was burned by hostile New Yorkers in 1831. Charlestown, a neighboring community of Boston, erupted into mass anti-Catholic violence over the murder of a native-born resident, reportedly by Irish Catholics. In 1834, amidst erroneous reports of a nun forcefully imprisoned there and the fulminations of Protestant preachers, and angry mob burned the Ursuline convent in Charlestown to rubble. Strongly anti-Catholic Protestant ministers, in 1834, were assaulted in riotous fashion by Catholic mobs in Baltimore and New York. Anti-Catholic sentiments were deliberately stroked by several notable Protestant ministers, speakers, and authors. Samuel F.B. Morse, Lyman Beecher, and William Craig Brownlee openly asserted varying conspiracy theories, claiming the Catholic Church and foreign

19 Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery, 4-6; Bennett, Party of Fear, 60-64; Knoble, America for the Americans, 46.
governments aimed to subvert the United States government, or at the very least ensure the
King James Bible was removed from schoolhouses. Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures*, published
in 1836, although later verified as false, only added fuel to the fire of conspiracy-minded anti-
Catholics. Open anti-Catholic mob warfare broke out in the Kensington Riot, outside of
Philadelphia, in 1844, resulting in catastrophic loss of life and property. Far from being isolated
incidents, riots and mob violence involving native-born Americans and Irish American
immigrants surfaced as a commonplace urban expression of the nativist debate.20

In the 1830s-1850s New York City politics was fiercely competitive and characterized by
reports of extensive patronage and corruption. Although other minor political parties existed,
the dominant forces were the Whig and Democratic Parties. As early as the 1830s the
Democratic Party began courting the immigrant vote with increasing success. As immigration
accelerated, the electoral significance of the Democratic Party increased. Although Whigs were
not expressly nativist, they often demonstrated nativist leanings, passing laws designed to limit
immigrant voting rights in New York and backing Catholic efforts to remove the Protestant King
James Bible from public schools. Neither the Democrats nor the Whigs exerted long term
control over New York City politics, frequently trading success at the ballot box from election
term to election term. Although the mid-1840s and mid-1850s saw the increase of successful
nativist political parties, their victories were short-lived and usually followed by near complete
implosion.21

The manifestations of these anti-Irish attitudes were, at least in large part, due to their
transmission through mass culture. Visual imagery from newspapers, periodicals, and minstrel

20 Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 58-60, 70-71, 92, 103, 222; Leonard, *American Nativism*, 57; Maria
Monk, *Awful Disclosures by Maria Monk of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*, 3rd Ed. (London: James S.
Hodson, 1851); Knoble, *America for the Americans*, 33, 54; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 6; Bennett,
*Party of Fear*, 62.
sheet music covers acted as windows into the popular perceptions of Irish immigrants, as well as vehicles for further spreading anti-Irish sentiment. The pervasiveness of imagery unfavorable to the Irish and Irish Americans created an oversimplified and one-dimensional Irishman in mass culture, readily available to confront and confound New York’s native-born.
Chapter One: Reflections of Irish Immigration

The construction of the Irish American archetype relied heavily upon a foundation of visual images of poor, starving, and dying Irishmen and women in Ireland, and of recent immigrants to New York City. At the base was, of course, a series of very real and dramatic historic events: the potato blights of 1843-1852. The catastrophic starvation and loss of life of the famine became a dominant story in the then-emergent modern international press. Accounts and images of widespread suffering were indelibly stamped onto the image of the Irish in the American mind and popular culture. Although many of these images were accurate depictions, their production and reproduction seared the picture of the denigrated, starving Irishman into the American psyche. It was as if the Irish had become a metaphoric figure of poverty and suffering itself. Artists were sent around New York City to capture newsworthy events as they happened. A given scene underwent a selective framing process in which the subject or subjects were selected in a given space and time, viewed from one specific angle. The image presented by print media portrayed starving Irish peasants, wearing ragged clothing, in the depths of great poverty.²²

Usually occupying different social, cultural, class, and geographical spaces, the native-born were unlikely to form opinions of Irish American residents on a case-by-case, face-to-face basis. Their interactions were less with actual Irishmen but much more with the idea of the Irish masses, often through the medium of newspapers or the minstrel stage. Knowledge of high levels of immigration was conflated with images of Irish immigrants leaving Ireland, as well as arriving in the United States to form a singular image of the Irishman or Irishwoman. Since most

images of Irish people appearing in the media, whether they depicted Irish tenant farmers in Ireland, Irish people in the act of immigrating, or recent Irish arrivals on American shores, displayed the brutal hardships of fleeing poverty, starvation, and destitution, as well as realities of inexpensive antebellum cross-Atlantic sea voyages, the native-born came to see in the Irish suffering and oppression. The native-born formed and sustained their opinions of Irish Americans based on selective, and heavily weighted imagery.23

**Immigration**

Antebellum native-born Americans could hardly ignore or be indifferent to the nature and circumstances of Irish people. Incredible influx of immigrants, many of whom were Irish nationals, into New York City proved an inescapable fact of living in one the largest port cities in the United States. Daily, hundreds or even thousands of Irish men and women shuffled off tightly-packed ships shoudering all of their worldly possessions. Nearly 900,000 Irish immigrants passed through New York’s harbor between 1847 and 1851. More than 3,000 Irish

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23 Antebellum New Yorkers rarely deviated from the de facto social segregation that existed in the city. City neighborhoods and social circles were often divided along racial, ethnic, and class lines. For more, see Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The Nineteenth-Century New York Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World’s Most Notorious Slum* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 18-20. Also see, Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997), 35. Ryan argues that the large thoroughfares of New York City brought native-born and Irish immigrants together on a fairly regular basis, their interactions, to a far greater extent, were the product of special events and celebrations within the city, as well as day-to-day occurrences. Many Irish immigrant neighborhoods existed in close proximity to native-born communities, however, they were clearly divided and separate from each other. For instance, Ryan notes, “New Yorker patois had terms for even more refined socioeconomic grading of social space: Gothamites divided Broadway between the ‘dollar and the shilling side.’” The largely Irish immigrant and negro neighborhood Five Points, she also notes, “had become the spatial symbol of poverty well before 1850.” Indeed, although the city was connected by a large grid of streets, social interaction between the native-born and Irish immigrants was likely limited to occasional commercial transactions and sharing walking spaces. Most native-born New Yorkers likely ever set foot in Five Points or other immigrant communities, choosing to read about them instead in newspapers and periodicals.
immigrants a week flowed onto the streets of New York City at the end of this period. In 1854 alone, New York City saw 319,000 new immigrants disembark onto its streets. Many of these immigrants settled permanently in the city, often in heavily-saturated Irish American slums. To residents of New York this steady human cascade of often poor and travel-weary Irish dramatically altered the shape of the city. The new tide of immigrants was seen increasingly as Europe’s unwanted. Even the most sympathetic native-born New Yorker could not fail to notice the ever-changing composition of the urban demographic.²⁴

The impetus for Irish immigration – the potato famine – as well as class differences between Irish and other immigrants, distinguished the Irish from their contemporaries. Eight in ten Irish immigrants came from the working class, possessing few marketable skills. Other immigrant groups, such as those from the Germanic states or Britain, generally came from higher class backgrounds. While Manhattan and Brooklyn totaled 324,000 residents in 1840, they possessed more than one million by 1860. Of the roughly half-a-million New York City residents in 1850, 133,730 were Irish-born, a number which was augmented by more than 50,000 new Irish-born immigrants in just five years. Since many Irish immigrants barely possessed the means to reach New York City, the nation’s largest port city, the poorest were often forced to settle there for at least for short period of time or even permanently. Although the need for laborers to construct railroads and canals in New York, Pennsylvania, and the New England siphoned off over half of Irish immigrants entering the city, a great number remained.

German immigrants, often better positioned economically, moved further inland in greater numbers, settling in high numbers between the Ohio and Mississippi Valley regions.\textsuperscript{25}

The issue of accelerating Irish immigration concerned many in urban areas on the East coast, but particularly those in New York City, who lived in immigrants’ most popular destination. Newspapers frequently published yearly or even ship-by-ship statistics of the number of steerage passengers arriving from Irish and British ports. But even within this general discourse on the nature of immigrants, the Irish, from the beginning, possessed a particular position, seen as uniquely destitute even compared to their fellow immigrants. While German immigrants, for instance, were characterized as “a very good class of population, very industrious and generally bound for the country,” the Irish “generally remain in the cities, much to their own disadvantage.” The fact that poor Irish immigrants who entered New York tended to stay there became enshrined in the discourse on Irish Americans. As the population of New York City swelled, so did the anxiety of many of its native-born residents.\textsuperscript{26}

Scenes of newly arrived Irish immigrants, reproduced in a variety of settings and styles, emerged as one of the most consistent and common images of the Irish in America. As the Irish gathered to board vessels bound for New York, disembarked, or sought housing, employment, or help for Irish immigrant-aid organizations, they were frequently captured and portrayed in large masses. Although scenes of Irish immigrants would likely have varied little from scenes of any other passenger group (immigrant or non-immigrant), it becomes apparent to anyone familiar with the visual sources of the period that immigrant crowd scenes were disproportionately Irishmen. The frequent production of images of Irish in this particular stage of immigration magnified the perceived amount of already large numbers of Irish immigrants in


\textsuperscript{26} See \textit{New York Herald}, 13 June 1844; \textit{New York Herald}, 26 June 1844; and \textit{New York Herald} 02 June 1860, pg. 2, col. B.
the native-born mind. The structure of international oceanic travel in the early to mid-
nineteenth century required that passengers gathered in mass to board, travel, and disembark.
Since the high levels of Irish immigration was a source of interest to many native-born, the
immigrant crowd found itself disproportionately focused on, creating the perception that wave
upon wave of Irish men and women steamrolled off ships daily.

For instance, consider the image of a crowded immigration office in Ireland, with many
of its inhabitants destined for the United States. This image, just one example of many similar
representations like this scene, played upon the anxieties of the native-born. Immigrant families
bearing all of their worldly possessions wait to be transported to their new home. Signage
indicates the office is merely a conduit for shuffling great masses of destitute Irish from County
Cork to Quebec, the first stop in the New World en route to New York City. A lone Irishman
stands in the center of the room, his hand desperately searching his pocket, betraying he lacks
financial means. On the ground next to him stands his shillelagh. This future resident of the
United States brings with him his burdensome poverty and implement of violent lack of self-
control. Irish women sit isolated from the rest of their male counterparts. Sorrowful faces
turned downward in despair. One rummages through her bag, in an attempt to find that which
she knows is not there. Hunger, however, drives her onward. The realities associated with
being a poor immigrant assault the eye of the native born American viewer, conscious of the
fact that he or she will soon be forced to welcome this group of undesirables into his land.²⁷

²⁷ Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper [New York], 12 January 1856
From the immigrant office to the port of arrival, the ever-present crowd of Irish immigrants continues into New York. In an attempt to reform the immigration process that produced “paupers” and prostitutes, as well as provide “medical exam[s]” and “treatment” for immigrants, New Yorkers converted the “public and time honored” Castle Garden facility into an immigrant depot. Immigrants stream out of steerage aboard ships traveling from Europe onto crowded gangplanks, depositing these unwanted and likely undesirable foreigners onto American soil. The poor quality of Irish immigrants necessitated drastic immigration reform, creating the first official immigration center in the United States. The battery on which Castle Garden stood dated back to the early days of Dutch settlement and symbolized New York City’s long and rich heritage. Now it was a metaphor for the city itself – the dumping ground for Europe’s poor, starving, diseased, and undesirable.  

28 Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper [New York], 29 December 1855.
To those New Yorkers concerned with increasing immigration, repeated images appearing in the popular press likely served to reflect and aggravate their anxieties. If the influx of the foreign-born was not at least a point of interest to many newspaper readers, such images would not find a market. Immigrants rush off transatlantic vessels in an American harbor, in a seemingly lifelike depiction. In addition to the family with a small child in the corner of the scene, continuing the perception of vagrant impoverished families arriving with no place to go, a horde of immigrants of all ages rush to meet two immigrant residents waiting for them. Behind the figures in the foreground, a faceless mob of indistinguishable immigrants crowd the dock. This illustration, potentially intended as neutral, played on the anxieties of many Americans concerned or becoming concerned with the increasing number of immigrants arriving and dwelling in their cities.29

29 Winslow Homer, Emigrant Arrival at Constitution Wharf, Boston, 1857. For more on viewer reception theory see Schwartz, Spectacular Realities, 5.
There is no reason to suspect that the people that produced the scene at the Castle Garden, which on the surface merely depicts huddled groups of immigrant families, intended to denigrate the Irish. Yet, much is connoted by the image. Immigrants, clearly with no home or prospects of employment, use the facility as an “Immigrant Depot.” The almost other-worldly immigrants stand, or slump, in contrast to the grand spectacle of vast open interior spaces, Roman arches, columns, and fountains, the meeting place of modernity and antiquity. Busy and productive Americans attend to their affairs in the background, while peasants remain static in the foreground, a symbol of the failures of pre-modern Europe, completely unaware of the passage of time indicated by the large clock in the background. Although some of the immigrant faces show light and detail, many are just shadowy figures, indicating their unknown and perhaps undesirable status. Instead of congregating in the light, this potentially dangerous group prefers the shadows and to remain in the fringes of society.\(^{30}\)

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\(^{30}\) *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* [New York], 29 December 1855, Iss. 3, Col. A, 48.
As the Irish began arriving in great numbers in the New York harbor and other major U.S. cities, images of these destitute Irish masses became the lens through which all immigrants came to be viewed. Depictions of impoverished immigrants inundating New York City in great numbers imparted the sense that the people and problems of the potato famine arrived at the doorsteps of American citizens. In an article applauding the efforts of the Irish Emigrant Office appears an illustration detailing a common element of the Irish American archetype. Underneath a sign bearing the inscription, *Irish Emigrant Society*, a crowd of immigrants waits patiently, with seemingly little purpose or eagerness to accomplish much else. Men, women, and children stand, sit, or lean against posts. Just as these Irish Americans poured into an already crowded urban storefront, they too burst through New York harbor and onto the streets of New York City. These same poor farmers and victims of the potato famine, although not yet appearing as ragged as the Irish archetype would become, rush the Irish Emigrant Society door
from every possible direction, despite the fact the interior is completely full. The image proves a
fitting reminder to native New Yorkers that daily, foreigners entered their city in droves.  

Irish immigrants, seen as bringing the whole of their population to the United States, are
the focus of a cartoon. One states, “Be jabers! we’ve got the Ould Country now, we’ll annix it
fast and no mistake!,” while attempting to drag the entire island of Ireland towards the
American coast using the Atlantic telegraph cable. The foreign Irish, exemplified by their unique

31 The Weekly Herald [New York], 12 July 1845, Iss. 28, Col D. It should be noted here that the treatment
given to Irish immigrants by the Herald was usually not explicitly negative. The cited image came from a
decidedly positive article on the Irish Emigrant Office. The Herald also published a number of other
articles lauding the Irish Immigrant Office, as well as fulminating against anti-Irish prejudice and
employment discrimination. For examples, see The Morning Herald [New York] 12 June 1830, Iss. 162,
May 1839, Iss. 116, Col. C.
brogue, arriving in droves played upon native-born anxieties. The crowd of Irish Americans now threatened to bring even larger crowds of Irish.  

As American cities grew, they became increasingly seen as dens of moral degradation. Antebellum residents of large cities such as New York and non-residents alike began to a much larger extent than previous generations to feel the massive social and economic shifts towards urban centers. The native-born migrated into cities as immigrants arrived causing populations to soar. Most cities, New York included, lacked the capability to keep up with infrastructure needs to deal provide sanitary conditions, clean water, and other necessities. Overcrowded neighborhoods, swiftly and cheaply constructed, became a fixture in New York City and most other large American cities. The crowded conditions bred, according to many, immorality, violence, and vice.  

Images of the Irish in Ireland, and in the act of immigration, created the initial brushstrokes of the Irish American archetype. These images submitted themselves to the

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32 “An Irish-American Idea of the Use of the Atlantic Telegraph Cable — ‘Be jabers we got the Ould Country now, and we’ll annix it fast and no mistake,’” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper [New York], 24 July 1858, Iss. 138, Col. A, 126.

interpretations of the viewing public. The influx of suffering and impoverished Irish peasants provided little solace to native-born New York City residents. Dissimilar members or segments of society viewed reproductions of the Irish entering their city and found them threatening for different reasons. Observers of such imagery brought with them their own knowledge, opinions, and experiences. With the increase of images and accounts of newly-arrived immigrants came the beginnings of the construction of the Irish American archetype. In fact, these images contained the seeds of the later-pervasive themes of illness and death, pauperism, and moral degeneracy.

**Disease**

To the extent that the Irish were associated with poverty and desperation, they were also associated, in the minds of antebellum urban-dwellers, with disease. Although, it was of course widespread knowledge that all classes possessed a vulnerability to disease, the poor, largely because they were crowded together in unsavory environments, were believed to be more susceptible to disease and therefore posed a public danger. This was not, of course, merely a widespread perception, but was grounded in stern reality. The impoverished Sixth Ward frequently topped death rate statistics, with large numbers of children and adults dying from illness and epidemic diseases. One observer noted that often the poor “die from poverty and disease” while waiting for aid at the New York City almshouse on relief day.34

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Epidemics, often associated with international travel were a fearful fact of life in antebellum New York. The infamous yellow fever outbreak of 1793 in Philadelphia, which killed ten percent of the city’s population, and caused mass riots and evacuations, left an enduring mark upon residents of American port cities. Outbreaks of yellow fever, typhus, cholera, influenza, and other serious diseases occurred nearly annually in many cities. Newspapers in New York City brought tales of disease from many coastal cities such as New Orleans, Savannah, and Mobile, as well as Europe. One author stated “Everybody remembers the panic and death produced by the cholera in 1832. It came from Europe, and spread from Montreal throughout the whole country . . . [i]f the influenza has appeared at New Orleans, it will soon reach the Atlantic ports.”

This common belief was compounded by the fact that international travel for poor Irish immigrants was indeed quite deadly. The poorest Irish immigrants often travelled by the least expensive cross-Atlantic Canadian route, which in the infamous Black ’47 claimed the lives of twenty percent of all immigrant travelers. Years later the Herald reported that in the span of several weeks 359 of the 7,701 immigrants arriving from Europe died of illness and disease, including epidemic diseases such as cholera. Most Irish immigrants travelled as steerage passengers – the conditions of which were frequently compared to slave-ship holds by contemporary observers. The Irish, because of their poverty and reputation for being the victims of illness, came to be seen as the most likely victims of epidemic disease, as well as channels of disease to the native-born. International travel, disease, and the Irish often occupied space in newsprint. One such writer suggested, “One thing we can safely predict:

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should our city be visited by the yellow fever, which now prevails in Charleston and other places, the inhabitants contiguous to Anthony street will be inevitably swept off with the pestilence, should the intolerable nuisance be suffered to remain.” Anthony Street was located squarely within the New York City Irish dominated neighborhood of Five Points.  

Tragically, the association between Irish immigrants and disease was far from purely rhetorical construction. Reports of high Irish death rates betrayed an above average mortality amongst Irish immigrants in the United States to the native-born population. Overcrowded conditions and poverty in New York City Irish American neighborhoods fostered the spread of disease. Tales of cholera-infested immigrant vessels and “emigrant fever” (most likely typhus) helped fuel public health fears of many New York City residents. Fearful of the import of European diseases, many New York City residents viewed ships bearing immigrants with great suspicion. The Irish, often derided for lacking suitable hygiene, became the frequent target of native-born anxieties. Poor overseas passage conditions and substandard sanitation in congested Irish American neighborhoods shaped the discourse of the Irishman. The harsh realities of Irish immigrants traveling to and living in New York City became for many residents evidence of fundamental personal squalidness, rather than situational hardship, characteristic of the Irishman. Not only was the Irish immigrant personality loathsome, immigrant uncleanness threatened the health of the hygienic native-born.

Not only were the Irish thought to be more susceptible to disease because of their economic situation, their poverty, and crowded travel and living conditions, but they were


additionally thought to be at least partially to blame because of their lack of hygiene and their vicious behavior. The crowded living conditions of Irish American neighborhoods, as well as the widespread belief that the Irish were filthier and more vice-ridden than the native-born or other immigrants, added to commonly held biases that Irish immigrants were the cause of epidemic diseases in New York City. Cholera was even seen by many as an Irish disease. While the high incidence of disease amongst Irish immigrants was a situational fact of impoverished living conditions, poor public sanitation, and substandard medical care, it became reified as integral to the Irish character. The Irish residents of New York, instead of being seen as the victims of difficult lives, were pegged as the cause of their own suffering due to their vices, lack of culture, and inferior intelligence. One contemporary observer charged “that nearly half of the cases [of cholera] . . . occurred in the vicinity of the [largely Irish American] Five Points; and the other half in different foulspots, resorts of abject wretchedness, and dens of infamy . . . The City Authorities are imperatively called upon to remove entirely the inhabitants of Five Points; and to give the place a thorough cleaning and fumigation.” The perception that the Irish possessed inferior hygiene to the native-born and other immigrants, as well as lived in highly concentrated slums, made them the likely scapegoat for disease outbreaks in the city.\(^{38}\)

Irish Americans were often portrayed in mass culture as fundamentally unhygienic, which allowed the simultaneous emergence of the disease-carrier trope. Frequently accounts in the popular press described the Irish American neighborhoods where “children were playing around, all [were] dirty.” Most white native-born New Yorkers never ventured to neighborhoods such as Five Points since they neither lived nor worked there. Because of these

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facts, accounts in the popular press formed the crux of their interaction with New York’s “filthy” Irish American residents.39

The farce of Mr. Sempronius Jones illustrates the connection between Irish immigrants, filth, and crowding. The image and accompanying tale, as fiction, were not based on face-to-face interactions, but instead were constructions using existing cultural tropes regarding the Irish in New York. Mr. Jones, supposedly a native-born visitor to New York City becomes sickened and horrified by “Pigs and Irishmen” dwelling together. The Irish neighborhood he walks through is described as: “Every door seemed to have its own particular little Alps of slime, and filth, and stifling smells . . . dirty children rolled and wallowed in the gutter and blocked-up the sidewalk. Every yawning cellar-way seemed to vomit forth swarms of inhabitants [and] . . . scores of red-haired Irish infants.” The squalor and crowding of Irish American neighborhoods makes the native-born “philanthropist . . . philosopher [and] son of the Great Republic” so sick he must immediately leave the city. The Irish children playing in the gutter, the conspicuously dressed b’hoy leaning in the background, and the burly barefoot Irishwoman offend the viewer and the fictional respectable visitor to such a degree as to cause utter revulsion.40

40 Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper [New York], 20 June 1857.
A cramped ship, overfilled with the bodies of Irish bound for American cities, only bolstered reports of the emigrant vessel as a cesspool of festering disease and degradation. Only silhouetted outlines, barely visible faces, and occasional limbs confront the viewer’s eye. The sheer darkness enhances the unknown and dangerous elements of these Irish immigrants. Irish passengers are piled in bunks, stacked vertically upon each other in long rows down both sides of the ship. Each bunk is filled by several Irish. This organization resembles more closely
livestock quarters than conditions for humans. Although potentially evoking sympathy, these images conjured up fear that the hazardous conditions of immigration would lend themselves to epidemic outbreaks in port cities. Scenes such as this, many native-born thought, were harbingers of unwieldy suffering and death in their homes.\textsuperscript{41}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Masses of Irish watch as an overcrowded vessel carries their countrymen to the New World. Irish men, women, and children occupy the ship’s deck and steerage quarters. The crowded conditions in the foreign port and on the immigrant-bearing ship mirror the conditions of Irish American neighborhoods in New York City. Europe, and Ireland in particular, are quite literally exporting their unwanted to the United States. Under deck, the darkened hold of the ship contains the shadowy and unknown bodies of Irish immigrants. Even in broad daylight, where the surfaces of the ship such as the deck, mast, and rigging appear brightly lit, the crowds of immigrants remain darkened. Interestingly, while some contemporary images depict Irishmen in Ireland as menacing, in this image, those Irish which remain at port are still depicted in bright tones, only becoming threatening when they board the immigrant vessel.\textsuperscript{42}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{41} Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper [New York], 12 January 1856.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
Not surprisingly, visual images from the minstrel stage also reflected disease and dying amongst Irish American New Yorkers. Reality became coupled with pure fantasy on the minstrel stage. The negative image of the stage Irishman possessed roots in the British stage where, as William H.A. Williams notes, the Irish were disdained for their “poverty, ignorance, incompetence, and spiritual and physical degradation of a defeated people.” As reports of diseased and dying Irish immigrants circulated, the minstrel stage both reflected and enhanced these themes. Minstrelsy became one of the main points of interaction between working class New Yorkers (including many of the Irish American working class) and producers of popular cultural expression. Viewers and producers of minstrel performance negotiated meaning of comic spectacles of Irishmen. Paddy, the common Irish minstrel character, had to mirror at least some degree of the popular opinions of the audience in order to remain entertaining, credible, and comical.43

43 Williams, ‘Twas Only an Irishman’s Dream, 59.
The surreal setting for “The Dying Emigrant’s Prayer” exposes not only the association of illness and death with Irish immigrants, but also the longing for home. Many men appear gathered around the sickbed of a nearly deceased immigrant, his family strangely absent. He laments, “A stranger bathes my fevered brow and hears my dying prayer.” In the background lingers a possible cause of his death – the immigrant vessel. Although this particular minstrel piece features a greatly charitable depiction of the Irish, no doubt due to its dedication to the Irish Relief Committee, it still captures and reproduces the Irish archetype of the sickly, disease-spreading immigrant.44

Although the travel and living conditions of Irish immigrants likely bore less relation to fundamental deficiencies in personal hygiene than to realities of inexpensive steerage travel and

impoverished living conditions, the image of the filthy and diseased Irishman became reified in popular discourse. Anxiety over epidemic diseases further conflated with this image of the Irishman. Realistic images of Irish immigrant passengers mixed with hyperbolic minstrel performances and cartoons to further denigrate the archetypal Irishman in the native-born mind.

Images of the Irish immigrating to and settling in New York City provided a sensationalized lens through which to view them. While the producers of these images in most cases were simply reproducing “reality,” they were also acting as the vehicle for the transmission and proliferation of negative aspects of the Irish immigration, such as mass travel and illness. Although Irish immigrants indeed arrived in large numbers and were prone to early death, these aspects of Irish American existence were enhanced due to the disproportionate attention paid to them. In this way, these situational aspects of refugee life became reified as fundamental to the Irish character. Images of Irish immigration however, were not forced upon their viewers. Interest or anxiety of increased immigration prompted the producers of mass culture to circulate representations of Irish mobs and filthy, dying immigrants to meet the consumption needs of their clientele. Due to native-born interest, the Irish became the focus of increasingly prevalent mass cultural representations, and thus became, at least in the native-born mind, more populous, filthy, and sickly.
Chapter Two: Shaping Visions of Irish American Settlement

Americans in the 1840s and 1850s did not simply passively accept, undigested, a body of cultural assumptions about Irishmen. Among other things, these stereotypes were influenced by broader cultural and intellectual trends of the day. Most notably, contemporary ideas regarding the environment and gender shaped the ways that antebellum native-born New Yorkers viewed their new Irish neighbors. Many Americans believed the environment profoundly influenced traits such as character, personality, intelligence, morality, and even physical characteristics. Although frequently anti-racialist, environmentalism could also have racist implications. One contemporary author argued that racial differences derived from groups breaking off from “civilized” society and migrating to “uncultivated regions remote from their original habitations. Here, forgetting the arts of civilized life, they, with their posterity, degenerated, in a course of time, into all the ignorance and rudeness of savagism.” This widespread belief about the power of one’s environment led many to view poor, malnourished, unskilled, and seemingly peculiar Irish immigrants with increased suspicion. As images emphasizing Irish drunken and violent tendencies circulated, they fed anxieties that these situational realities, now part of the urban environment, would spread to the native-born.45

The popular belief in the power of the urban environment is illustrated in an image portraying two possible tracks in a man’s life – one leading to the “love and esteem of those around him” and family, the other to being “a burden on society, and . . . not a soul to wish that his life had been prolonged.” Although the images of health and prosperity on one side, and poverty, ill-health, and degradation on the other are two possible lives of the same person, the

45 Samuel Stanhope Smith, Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human (New Brunswick: J. Simpson and Company, 1810), 17.
“essential elements of either course of development . . . depends mainly upon the influences brought to bear upon him from without.” His environment, including attending school or living life on the street, determines whether or not he will be a distinguished-looking man, or have a “depressed forehead, the hard eyebrow, the coarse mouth, and the thickened neck” of the more “animal”-looking man. The man who grew up on the street “if he escapes the state prison or the gallows” becomes a “drunken loafer,” eventually despised by those around him.⁴⁶

Beliefs regarding inherited traits, drawn from the writings of French scientist Jean Baptiste de Lamarck were likely further distressing to many native-born New Yorkers when applied to their Irish American neighbors. Lamarck's popular evolutionary philosophy held that
environment shaped the traits of animals and humans. These traits were then passed on to an animal’s offspring. One contemporary observer noted that the average “Irish gentleman . . . is handsome, large, courageous – a man of fine instincts, brilliant imagination, courtly manners, and full of vital force.” The same observer, however, noted that “the Irish peasant . . . is ugly, of stunted stature, and pugnacious; and he produces children like himself.” The only difference between “the two classes . . . from a common blood” was that the peasants had been subjected to “mental and physical degradation.” The Irish could by their mere presence and living conditions impart their undesirable traits amongst the native-born population. Also, not only did Irish Americans pose a threat to the native-born by corrupting their environment, the undesirable traits of Irish immigrants would be passed along were intermarriage to occur, since these environmentally acquired traits were then passed along to their children.47

One of the traits of Irish Americans as portrayed in antebellum images, which worried many native-born, was their inappropriate gender roles. Irish American men, often associated with poverty, drunkenness, and violence were seen as incapable of appropriately acting as head-of-household or even of mastering themselves. Antebellum notions about proper gender roles largely reflected legal, social, and cultural norms. White men were free to own property, enter into contracts, and in most cases, vote. Women, however, rarely exercised legal independence or property ownership, and were considered dependents of their fathers, husbands, or guardians. A man served as the head-of-household, typically fulfilling legal obligations associated with the position, and also providing all or the majority of the family’s income. In this way, he acted as the public face of his family and was responsible for the care of his dependent wife and children. A woman, unless widowed, transferred her dependency from her father to

her husband upon marriage, and typically was expected to manage her household, whether
supervising house servants or performing domestic tasks. Operating outside of these
conventions not only challenged social and cultural mores, but legal ones as well. Popular
opinions about male and female cognitive norms also greatly influenced antebellum gender
concepts. Men were typically seen as the more rational of the sexes, while women were
typically viewed as emotional and often irrational. To be considered manly involved a great deal
of self-mastery. Behaviors or traits which resembled the womanly traits of emotional and
irrational resulted in the perception that the male in question was not manly.  

Images of Irishmen denoting poverty, alcoholism, and violence connoted immorality and
unmanliness; additionally, images bearing the association of Irish women with prostitution and
working outside of the home painted them as particularly unwomanly. Popular conceptions
regarding proper behavior and gender roles were negotiated in newsprint and on the stage.
One vehicle for this negotiation was the archetypal Irishman. The image of the Irish immigrant
reflected varying attitudes towards broader social issues confronting New Yorkers in the
decades preceding the Civil War. Increasing urbanization, population growth, changes in modes
of production, and evolving Protestant religious thought helped create a tumultuous
environment which spawned wide-ranging reactions, from social reform efforts to violent
hostility. To many antebellum New Yorkers, the issues of poverty, alcoholism, violence, and
prostitution were not limited to Irish immigrants. The archetypal Irishman and Irishwoman,
however, embodied to the greatest extent the evils confronting society. They were the
incarnation of vice, uncontrolled behavior, and unmanliness or unwomanliness.

48 Laura F. Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction (Urbana and
Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 6-7, 26; Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural
History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago
Press, 1995), 7-9; Amy S. Greenberg, Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire (Cambridge
and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144.
Poverty

Another quality frequently emphasized in visual images of Irish Americans that many native-born likely feared was poverty, and its companion, degrading toil – unmanly aspects common to immigrant life, which the native-born feared would spread to the manly self-reliant. As disturbing as the practical aspects of having masses of impoverished people draining the city of its resources were, anxieties ran highest over the native-born becoming unmanned by the environmental influence of their undesirable Irish neighbors. Many newly-immigrated Irish settled in urban slum neighborhoods in New York and other major American cities. Usually arriving with relatively little and lacking many marketable skills, Irish Americans often filled overcrowded, dangerous, and filthy tenements in mostly Irish neighborhoods. Many Irish immigrant women took employment as domestic servants or laundresses, while Irish men worked unskilled labor positions. Many native-born New Yorkers were acutely aware of Irish American women’s employment outside of the home, and of the economic necessity which drove this phenomenon.49

The primary concerns of many of the native-born were that Irish immigrants would burden American citizens with their poverty, and spread their unmanliness, evidenced by their poverty, through the urban environment to the native-born. Fear that Irish Americans would fill the almshouses of New York City was fueled by the popular imagery of backwards Irish paupers storming the city. What made the prospect of overwhelmed almshouses particularly disturbing, though was that many native Protestant New Yorkers believed poverty was the result of moral weakness and immorality. The presence of crowded almshouses pointed to a larger social

disorder beyond their walls. One commentator noted, for instance, that Irish immigrant
“Intemperance is assigned as one of the main causes of pauperism.” Poverty proved especially
dangerous because of the threat it represented to the millennial salvation of the United States
and the Christians within. Although Irish American economic hardships reflected actual
circumstances common to most laborers in the 1840s and 1850s, Irishmen were
disproportionally represented as engaged in degrading toil. In the mass culture, the Irishman’s
repeated appearances bearing the signs of impoverishment altered the public perception of real
Irishmen. When a New Yorker viewed the image of an Irish immigrant, no matter his
appearance, part of what he or she saw was poverty. What the Irishman’s poverty meant to the
New York viewer was often immorality and unmanliness – connoted rather than denoted
meanings.50

Minstrel sheet music covers repeatedly reinforced the theme of extreme poverty. The
stage Irishman, as well as Irish immigrants in print media, displayed extreme indigence. From
completely ragged clothes to an extremely disheveled appearance, the Irishman proved his
poverty to native observers. *The Fine Ould Irish Gentleman*, 1845, features on its cover an
Irishman so ragged his clothes appear as if they might disintegrate. His face is so dirty as to be
nearly blackface, similar in appearance to the appearance of “blacked up” actors portraying
Negro characters on the stage. It is perhaps not unexpected, however, that the depiction of a
minstrel Irishman would bear out the exaggerated notions of immigrant poverty, since the stage
tended to portray the maligned in disparaging ways.51

50 An extensive body of literature exists examining popular nativist writings of the antebellum United
States. Fear of immigrant poverty was a common essential element of the anti-immigrant trope. See
William Patrick McGovern, “It’s Not No Popery”: The Rhetorical Origins of the American Republican Party,
51 John Brougham, *The Fine Ould Irish Gentleman* (Boston: Geo. P. Reed, 1845) from the LSLSMC, Box 49,
Item 23, 1.
This and countless other near-subhuman depictions of Irish American poverty perpetuated exaggerated notions of Irish poverty. This is a notable departure from the not explicitly ideological representations of Irish immigrants which apparently sought to reveal Irish pauperism, but not to accentuate it. The caricatured Irishman became increasingly more threatening in his poverty and unmanliness. The poorer Irish Americans became, at least in the eyes on native New Yorkers, the larger the economic and moral strain they placed upon society,
as well as the greater threat they posed to the native-born by creating an urban environment characterized by ever-growing pockets of poverty, unmanliness, and immorality.\textsuperscript{52}


The poor, slovenly “Gent” typified the Irishman. Although his national heritage is unmentioned, he could easily be seen as an Irish immigrant by contemporary viewers given the close association of Irish Americans with poverty in the native-born mind. Not only is he obviously without the means to adequately provide for himself, he also lacks the self-mastery necessary to even effectively manage his personal hygiene. His hair is wild and uncombed, as is his facial hair. His clothes provide an awkward fit. His offensive unmanliness makes him both a figure of interest and cause of anxiety. To the native-born, he cannot be expected to fit the role of head-of-household, since he cannot provide for himself or even care for his own body. Many feared that morally deficient foreigners would dilute the robust American stock, making the

nation weak. The native-born dreaded having to care for lazy and incompetent Irish immigrants, but also that their inferior traits would become part of the national character. The frightening proposition of entire families of indigent Irish immigrants creating environments of unmanliness is captured in *The Irishman’s Shanty*, produced in 1859. Sung by Matt Peel, an Irish American, this minstrel piece manages to capture and perpetuate the Irishman as pauper archetype. The sheet music cover features a large family, completely idle, sharing the same space as their animals and a decrepit hovel. Two very young children signal that such families intend to populate the United States, their young age convey the sense that they are the first of what is likely to be many more. An old man, suggesting the Irishman’s subhuman nature, sits on the same ground as farm animals. The theme of poverty carried over

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53 *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* [New York], 23 January 1858.
to the minstrel stage. The minstrel performer, singing *The Irishman’s Shanty* reproduced the archetype of the poor Irishman on stage for working-class New Yorkers, rather unexpectedly advancing the denigrated vision of the Irishman rather than challenging it.54

Aside from the perception that Irish immigrants overtaxed almshouses, the Irish archetype represented an important challenge to American socio-cultural gender constructs of the antebellum United States. Most antebellum Americans possessed defined opinions about family and societal structure. Man, as the patriarch of his family, embodied the financial provider. A patriarch unable to fulfill his proscribed role proved himself not truly manly. The construction of the hopelessly impoverished Irish family, served to unman all Irish men. The archetype of the Irishman stood in sharp contrast to the widely accepted image of the

54 *The Irishman’s Shanty. A Favorite Comic Song with Imitations*, (New York: Firth, Sons and Co, 1859) from the LSLSMC, Box 50, Item 46, 1; Williams, *’Twas Only an Irishman’s Dream*. 
responsible and morally strong native New York City male. The meaning of Irish American poverty was negotiated in print and on stage. Connotations of morality and manhood, or the lack thereof, mixed with more concrete realities of Irish immigrant economics. Seen as importing and nurturing unmanliness in the urban environment, the Irish portrayed in mass culture confronted their neighbors with the threat of a corrupted environment which might spread unmanliness to the native-born.  

**Drunkenness**

Against the backdrop of Protestant millennialism emerged the temperance movement, one of the defining social, cultural, and legal forces of the nineteenth century. The movement, which sought to discourage or even force to a stop the consumption of alcohol, distained drunkenness as a corruptor and destroyer of men and their families. Efforts to discourage men from drinking ranged from signing individual temperance pledges, to voluntary societies, to speaking campaigns, and later, legal challenges to alcohol production and sales, filtered into popular culture and onto the minstrel stage.  

The archetypal Irishman, often depicted as a drunkard, was particularly degraded amongst many of the native-born due to the emergent temperance movement, which for many

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56 The millennialist interpretation of Christianity, common in antebellum Protestantism, increasingly saw the relation between personal and national salvation. Many native-born Americans ascribed to millennialism, the dominant Protestant theology of the era. Believers held that a thousand year period of peace and prosperity would precede that second coming of Christ, thus providing the theologically based impetus to agitate for massive social reforms, such as Temperance. Americans attempted to reform society in order to stimulate the onset of the millennium. Immorality, especially the widespread immorality credited to Irish Americans, threatened the progression toward peace and also Christ’s return. For more see James H. Moorhead, “Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought,” *Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (1984), 525.
linked the shortcomings of the intemperate, seen as immoral and unmanly, to the Irish American stereotype. The role of the Irishman as a drunkard threatened the antebellum ideal of responsible manly patriarch. The would-be head and provider of the family was instead a dependant of his wife and children. The idea of a man in nineteenth century America unable to care for his own body, provide for himself or his family, or even maintain control over his own will leveled a devastating blow to the very fiber of his manhood and the image of his manhood. The drunkenness of the Irish American image adopted wholesale the denotations and connotations associated with temperance rhetoric, painting him as a slave to the bottle, unmanly, and an immoral degenerate.\textsuperscript{57}

Not only was the Irishman seen as an unmanly intemperate, he was also a primary contributor to the moral and manly decline of New York City. Many nineteenth-century Americans feared their will might be subjugated to liquor, becoming unmanned in the process. At the heart of this anxiety was the belief that environment had the potential power to supplant individual will. For many, especially temperance reformers, the presence of large concentrations of drunkards and grogshops threatened to ensnare moral and upstanding men in their vicious grasps.\textsuperscript{58}

The visual image of the drunkard frequently incorporated a variety of negative themes. A ragged man, living in absolute poverty and destitution, sits in his shack. His family, obviously ill taken care of and equally as destitute, labors in the background, disregarded. His infant sleeps in rags on a pile of straw. He sits alone, not taking care of his family, not working. He is no real man. A drunken crowd of men, all proudly displaying drooping bloodshot eyes, some smiling, others staring menacingly at the viewer, oppose Maine prohibition laws. The lack of


\textsuperscript{58} Parsons, \textit{Manhood Lost}, 20-21.
women indicates their abandonment of their families and their male role. These inebriates confront the viewer with not only contempt for morals and the family, but also outright threat of violence with their maniacal gaze. Another group of young men sit unconscious on a bench. The depths of their intoxication prove so great that they abandon their home and responsibilities for the barroom. Their manhood stripped, they are reduced to the status of children or invalids. These images of barrooms filled with drunkards also indicated the widespread nature of drunkenness, threatening to take many more into its clutches.⁵⁹

An incarcerated drunken Irishman, characterized as an “Irish Tiger,” accosts a fictionalized traveler to a New York City police station. The Irishman has been contained in a jail cell to sober-up. He violently seizes passers-by, making demands for his freedom. Not only does he attempt to harm those that pass by, he is a menace to productive antebellum Americans. His violent act symbolizes the harm he intends on the United States. More than a victim of circumstance, the Irishman is a willing participant in his drunken and unmanly condition. His drunkenness burdens and threatens the safety of the native-born of New York. He is lack of self-control personified.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{60} Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper [New York], 23 January 1858.
The Washingtonians, an antebellum temperance organization, juxtaposed the effects for drunkenness with those of sobriety. The drunkard’s home lays in disrepair, with a broken fence, roof, and shutter. Even the trees in his yard are dead, much like his manhood. The death and decomposition of the organisms and even property in the drunkard’s environment provide further evidence of the threat he poses to those in close proximity to him. A mere thin line of smoke exits his chimney, conveying the poverty and degree of suffering he hoists upon his innocent wife. She stands gazing out of the front window awaiting his unlikely return. She is left abandoned to care for herself. The well-dressed temperate man who "took the pledge" and his wife proudly exit their well-kept home. Not only is nothing broken, but the trees and wildlife
flourish around his home as well, exhibiting the benefits his moral manliness provides his environment. His home is well cared for, indicated by the hearty smoke exiting his chimney. His manly morality is further reinforced by the Christian church near his home, presumably where he and his wife are headed. The juxtaposition is startling. The drunkard is conspicuously absent from his property, family, responsibilities, and manhood.⁶¹

The farce of drunkards at O’Dogherty House, in which supposedly a party of Negros and other maligned ethnicities, along with “dustmen” and “hackmen” are entertained by Irish American hosts in a commercial laundry, “cabbage grounds, potatoe [sic] patch, and pigsty,” all drinking beer from one large barrel, clearly displays the common attitudes of the native-born toward Irish immigrants. Nearly all of the party participants brandish beer glasses or liquor bottles, displaying their love of drink. One guest is so intoxicated that he is lying on the floor underneath a bench. Others dance raucously or talk with a pig. The appearance of a pig as a

⁶¹ B.A. Burditt, The Washingtonian Quickstep (Boston: Geo. P. Reed, 1842) from the LSLSMC, Box 99, Item 68.
guest connotes the lack of manliness of the guests. Not only are the uncontrolled men feeding their base appetites, they are degraded to the status of an animal. Also, an Irish American woman sits between two men, betraying her potentially weak moral standards despite wearing a large cross on her chest. Very near her sits a costumed Satan, enthusiastically drinking with the rest of the party-goers. His close proximity to the “Christian” woman further enhances the immoral display of alcohol consumption by Irish Americans and the threat to the millennial salvation of the native-born. Perhaps quite surprising is the fact that this image appears in a Democratic-leaning, and generally pro-Irish newspaper, the *Herald*. While this type of characterization might be expected in minstrels or more nativist-inclined publications, its appearance here provides evidence of the convergence of biases against Irish Americans pervasive across the ideological spectrum.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) *The Morning Herald* [New York], 3 March 1840.
The drunken Irishman is portrayed as a hog, slave to alcohol – so ruined by his
intemperate consumption of liquor that he has lost his humanity and threatens to pass his
immoral drunkenness to his offspring and environmental neighbors. He is the picture of vice
and danger. He shows himself with a shillelagh in hand, indicating the combination of violence
and alcoholism. Literally unmanned, the Irishman has been deprived of his humanity, but also
his status as a manly head-of-household. His presence in the native-born environment makes
him likely to be an influence on those around him. Also, the Irish American archetype as a
drunkard, when compared with other drunken nationalities, appears the most altered. While
Germans and English also display their overweight bodies and love of alcohol, they maintain
human form and are only marginally unmanned.63

63 “Modern Idolatry,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine 23, Iss. 133 (New York: Harper and Brothers,
1860), 141; Several examples of alcohol-related song lyrics already cited are: Irishman’s Shanty, Moran’s
Barney Brallaghan, and Brougham’s Fine Ould Irish Gentleman.
The role of the Irishman as a drunkard threatened the antebellum ideal of responsible manly patriarch, but also endangered the manliness of his urban neighbors. Painting the Irish as heavy drinkers linked them to the connotations seen in all drunkards. The Irish American became unmanned, unable to care for himself or his family. Painted already as a poor intemperate, incapable of caring for his family, the Irishman posed a threat not only to his own family, but to the structure of American society as a whole due to his abdication of proper male responsibilities. With the salvation of the nation also at stake, given millenialist Protestant Christian thought, the Irish American archetype also represented a personal threat to the
temperate masses. To many Protestant Christians, the perception of the Irishman as an immoral drunkard endangered the onset of the millennium. The Irish invasion brought perceived foreign vice into a Christian nation. The presence of large groups of Irish American drunkards also increased the likelihood that the native-born would join the ranks of the vicious and inebriate.

**Violence**

Antebellum New York City’s Irish immigrant neighborhoods, especially Five Points, were infamous as the worst slums in America, filled with unparalleled crime, violence, immorality, and suffering. Five Points was purportedly awash with “revolting scenes of riot and debauchery and crime, which are peculiarly conspicuous in certain corrupt districts of this great metropolis, and notoriously pre-eminent at that portion of the Sixth Ward.” The discourse surrounding Irish American immorality, violence, and criminality seems to have led to the widely held beliefs about the nature of Irish immigrant neighborhoods. While evidence suggests that Five Points and other heavily Irish American neighborhoods in fact had crime rates similar to most other New York City neighborhoods, their reputation developed as lawless areas of brutality and violence. This seemingly unfounded reputation became conflated with the Irishman’s character as a violent thug in the native-born mind. In addition to the potential physical danger which Irish immigrants supposedly posed to the native-born populations of New York City, was the great potential for transferring unmanly, uncontrolled behavior.\(^6^4\)

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Amidst the massive social and economic upheavals of the nineteenth century, as urban populations exploded and patterns of economic production increasingly relied on factory labor, the specter of the violent criminal Irish immigrant emerged, threatening not only the physical safety of the native-born, but their manly self-mastery as well. Operating the same way as the drunkard Irishman trope, masses of violent Irishmen contributed their unmanly character to the New York City environment. Media reports of “five hundred [Irish laborers] . . . with clubs” beating former coworkers and “threaten[ing] murder” coupled with the more playful, yet equally dangerous Irish American at leisure, “full of fight . . . rioting, and rollicking; always ready for a drink, a devilment, a knock down, or drag out” reinforced the image of the Irishman as a violent menace. Depictions of the Irish archetype on the minstrel stage and in the popular press nearly always reminded the viewer, both subtly and overtly, of his violent potential. Not only is the uncontrolled rage of the Irish archetype threatening to the order of social peace, it also highlights deeper moral failings. Like alcoholism, lack of self-restraint indicated the Irishman’s incapability of self-mastery. The minstrel stage possessed an obligation to give its consumers what they desired. Therefore, the connoted meanings found in print became the denoted meaning produced on stage.65

The shillelagh, a walking stick and club, became deeply ingrained as an element in the iconographic representation of the Irishman. Frequently appearing in illustrations and on the minstrel stage, the bludgeoning tool symbolized the violent and uncontrolled nature of the Irish American. The 1830 sheet music cover, and no doubt stage depiction, of the shillelagh-wielding Barney Brallaghan details the Irish peril. Not only does his face display rage, his club is raised, ready to strike. More disturbing, however, is the fact that he has come in the middle of the

night to threaten a woman. She is the picture of virtue, sleeping peacefully in her bedroom, while outside, the deranged Irishman threatens her morality and her life.66

Even less overtly menacing depictions of the Irishman rarely deviate from the potentially dangerous shillelagh carrier. This 1840 sheet music illustration betrays the potential of the Irishman to turn from seemingly pleasant to a murderer only needs provocation. Although frequently used as a walking stick, the club is also slung over the shoulder of an Irish brute. This posture relays the lack of necessity in the function of walking, and true purpose as a battle weapon.67

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66 P.K. Moran, *Barney Brallaghan*, 1830
The dangerousness of criminal behavior closely associated with the Irishman is accentuated by the tools of his trade. Appearing in an article on the poor of New York City, for instance, a set of “Burglar’s Implements” convey the likelihood of violent confrontation with criminal perpetrators. More important, however, is the close connection of native-born between poverty and criminal behavior. To be a poor Irish immigrant is to be a criminal. Burglary, a non-violent property crime, is here linked with far more serious violent crimes involving bludgeoning tools, knives, daggers, and even a saber. This image conveys the poor Irishman’s propensity for criminal behavior, and uncontrolled violence.  


68 Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper [New York], 23 January 1858.
The extent of the danger posed to the native-born, both to the immediate physical safety and even more insidious environmental influence, from their Irish-born cohabitants is played out in an infamous scene of New York City riot. The infamous street fight between two Five Points political clubs known as the Bowery Boy and Dead Rabbits provides clear evidence to native-born viewers of the violent and lawless nature of New York City’s Irish immigrants. Men wielding clubs, rifles, and other weapons engage in bloody combat in the streets. Smoke and debris litter the streets of the slum neighborhood. Unrestrained aggression connotes their unmanly lack of self-restraint. To native-born observers, Irish immigrants import chaos and destruction into the city, a potential harbinger of the threat they pose the nation and its Christian salvation. When the police enter the scene to stop the violence and reinstate order, they are attacked by all parties, including Irish American women who hurl stones and bricks. The outright opposition by Irish immigrants to the civilized order and morality of native-born New Yorkers, as well as the unwomanly display of violence, reinforces the danger – both physical and environmental – which the immigrant classes pose to the American people. This
uncivilized and undesirable behavior, and those who perpetrate it, creates an environment of violence which threatens to spread to the character of New York’s non-immigrant population.⁶⁹

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⁶⁹ *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* [New York], 18 July 1857.
The Irishman, well groomed by suggestive visual imagery, became the recipient of native New Yorker’s fear. As the population of New York City tipped in the mid-1850s to equal parts native and foreign born, the fears intensified and exacerbated actual Irish-native conflicts. In 1855, when a well-known native-born thug, “Butcher Bill” Poole, was killed in a barroom dispute with an Irish American, New York exploded into anti-Irish hotbed. The unsavory victim received elevated status as an American patriot and innocent victim of an Irish American murder conspiracy. The Irish American archetype embodied a threat to citizens and country alike. The Irishman proved decidedly un-American through his supposed violent opposition and subversion of American democracy, as well as his seeming inability to control his own rage. The supposed violent potential of the Irishman confronted New Yorkers with the more real possibility that they would become the recipient of that violence, but also with the negotiated meaning of the immorality of Irish immigrants and their ability to transmit those traits to the native-born through environmental influences. Many believed that the violent and unmanly character of the Irish might spread to other city residents or even themselves.\footnote{Gorn, “Goodbye Boys,” 390, 393, 395.}

Women

Nineteenth-century women were often viewed through a gendered lens which included notions of irrationality and mental lack, but also purity, piety, and morality. Americans often pointed to women’s supposed lack of physical, mental, and emotional strength as evidence that they should remain in the private domestic sphere. At the same time, the domestic work women performed was appropriated elevated status. Raising children, running the home, and serving as the moral anchor for her family fell within antebellum notions of a virtuous woman’s
roles. Women were often viewed as naturally moral, while men constantly had to work at attaining self-mastery. A woman, however, who lost this innate virtue became a threatening temptation, with the potential to seduce and doom unwary men.\(^{71}\)

Like their male counterparts, many antebellum Irish women immigrated to New York with few employable skills and unmarried, and thus found themselves employed in domestic service or prostitution, fields supposedly which threatened the New Yorker’s environment and the individual morality of native-born men. Both occupations came with inherent social stigma. Domestic servitude frequently was seen as undesirable for several reasons. Respectable women were discouraged from seeking employment outside their own home; the public realm belonged to men. Domestic service was also viewed as degrading, only filled by Irish and Negro women. To a greater degree, prostitution carried with it connotations of shame, vice, and immorality. Immoral prostitutes seduced and corrupted men. As one native-born mother editorialized, “For woe is me, well do I know it – my oldest son has fallen victim to the harlot’s vile arts, and has estranged himself from his almost broken-hearted mother.” The seductive “fit agent of the devil” was reportedly from near the Irish American-dominated Five Points neighborhood. This neighborhood was seen by many native-born New Yorkers as “a most shameful, corrupt and demoralizing nest of brothels.” Despite the reputation, however, Five Points contained only barely more brothels than many other sections of New York City, which included the East River dockfront, Broadway district, the West Side, and the Lower East Side. Irish women, born pure and inherently moral, became fallen seducers of native-born men, threatening the morality of New York City and the nation.\(^{72}\)


\(^{72}\) Diane M. Hotten-Somers, “Relinquishing and Reclaiming Independence: Irish Domestic Servants, American Middle-Class Mistresses, and Assimilation, 1850-1920,” *New Directions in Irish-American*
Erin’s daughter was often portrayed in printed imagery as a young, beautiful woman in a picturesque Irish landscape. Her age indicates both her innocence and immaturity. She bears an expressionless face, with eyes rarely meeting the viewer’s. She is alone, with no men, children, or other women nearby. She is without a head-of-household to care for her and thus destined to fall into poverty and suffering. She also occupies the role of seducer. With no males to ensure her safety, account for her whereabouts, or check her emotional womanly nature, she threatens to tempt unsuspecting males to moral depravity. Her unmarried independent status informs the viewer that the Irish male responsible for her care have abdicated their manly duties. She seems forlorn, gazing longingly into the distance, in despair at the ground, or with her head resting on her hand in quite resignation. She is on the cusp of physical and moral ruin. Although she possesses youthful beauty and middle class dress, she will inevitably descend into wretch status, taking native-born men with her.  

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73 Mrs. Crawford and E.L. Hime, The Rose of Tyrone (Boston: Oliver Ditson, [n.d.]) from the LSLSMC, Box 120, Item 066; Catherine Hayes, Songs and Ballads Sung by Miss Catharine Hayes (Baltimore: G. Willic Jr., [n.d.]) from the LSLSMC, Box 042, Item 046; Charles Jeffreys, The Harp of Erin or Songs of Killarney (New York: Firth, Hall and Pond, [n.d.]) from the LSLSMC, Box 118, Item 064; J.W. Turner and C.A. White, Sweet Katie, the Pride of Tralee (Boston: White, Smith, and Company, 1874) from the LSLSMC, Box 135, Item 052; Mrs. Crawford and Crouch, Beautiful Songs of Erin (St. Louis: J.L. Peters and Bro., [n.d.]) from the LSLSMC, Box 118, Item 061.
Mrs. Crawford and E.L. Hime, *The Rose of Tyrone* (top left); Catherine Hayes, *Songs and Ballads Sung by Miss Catharine Hayes* (top right); Charles Jeffreys, *The Harp of Erin or Songs of Killarney* (middle left); J.W. Turner and C.A. White, *Sweet Katie, the Pride of Tralee* (middle right); Mrs. Crawford and Crouch, *Beautiful Songs of Erin* (below)
An abandoned young Irish woman represents the destruction of Irish women by Irish men. She sits in bucolic surroundings amidst evidence of her virtuous womanly labors, symbolized by the basket and package. Her lover, the lyrics reveal, has left her for a better life in the United States. Even though she represents the womanly ideal, she has been broken by her Irishness. The situational realities of poverty and starvation likely necessitated the departure of her mate, however, she now sits forlorn and alone.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{74} Frank Dumont and Jas. Stewart, \textit{Jennie, the Flower of Kildare. Song and Chorus} (New York: J.L. Peters, 1873).
Even as Irish women were given seemingly equal and positive status in many printed images, the situational facts of their existence such as poverty and domestic servitude, conveyed deeper possibilities of moral failings, burdensomeness, and improper behavior. Poor Irish American women wash the clothing of their economically superior employers or patrons. Mockingly referred to as “fine and bouncing girls,” they are clearly not womanly. While seemingly well-dressed, they wash and wear their “second-hand fineries.” Donning the clothes of their elite mistresses, they attempt to portray themselves as far better socially and economically, but also as womanly, when they are clearly quite the opposite. In doing so, they betray their ridiculous lack of self-knowledge and improvidence. In working, they are likely also taking on the unwomanly role of household head, both subverting their womanly nature and betraying the unmanly nature of their Irish American male counterparts. They choose or are forced out of necessity to work for wages when they should be operating in the home. Although this image of Irish American women features many levels of negative meanings, it appears in a
usually newspaper typically quite charitable to Irish immigrants, highlighting the convergence of
elements of the Irish immigrant trope in ideologically unexpected places.  

The frequent trope of abandoned, seductive, immoral, and unwomanly Irishwoman
 echoed on the stage and in newsprint reflected the anxieties of many of New York City’s native-
born population. Irish American women maintained a reputation, based in actual
circumstances, of serving as domestic servants, prostitutes, or both. The feelings many
harbored about these situational facts of Irish immigrant women’s existence became reified as
indicative of inherent moral and womanly failings of Irish women. The fact that many Irish
American women filled occupations deemed socially inappropriate gave rise to and supported
their ill-fated reputation.

75 *New York Herald, 06 June 1839*
Irish Americans appearing in mass culture frequently appeared as less fit morally, economically, and physically than their native-born neighbors, as well as unmanly or unwomanly, conveying a bastardization of the native-born environment to their contemporaries. Visual images conveying these meanings occurred in a variety of sources ranging from those which typically ridiculed the Irish, to those that were often sympathetic, to those that were even produced by Irish Americans. Even though these sources should have varied dramatically ideologically, they still produced, reproduced, and reinforced representations of unwomanly Irish American women. Although situational necessities of immigrant life often resulted in Irish Americans living in poverty, and Irish immigrant women working outside of the home, these aspects of life, along with their unsavory connotations, became reified as fundamental to the Irish character. Likewise, the common perception that Irishmen were violent drunkards further degraded popular opinions of them. The failings of Irish men, unable to provide solely for their families, as well as their supposed inability to attain self-mastery enough to control their drinking and violent impulses, made these immigrants appear unmanly to an extreme degree. Irish immigrant women, forced by circumstance to work as domestic servants or prostitutes were also painted as peculiarly unwomanly. To many native-born, Irish Americans posed a severe threat, not only because they might be the victim of Irish violence or immoral seduction, but also because Irish Americans created an immoral, unmanly, and unwomanly environment which threatened to pull into its depths native-born New Yorkers as well.
Chapter Three: Irish American and Native-Born Interactions

Antebellum New York City’s native-born population most vigorously negotiated the meaning and merits of the city’s Irish American population in arenas where generalizations produced and reproduced in the public discourse clashed with face-to-face interaction. This was particularly true of labor and political relations between the native-born and Irish Americans. Perhaps not surprisingly, opinions of Irish immigrants were the most varied in these discourses. When face-to-face interaction between the native-born and their immigrant neighbors confounded popular opinions of the Irish, the native-born often engaged in cognitive dissonance reduction. These attempts to minimize the significance of trope-challenging interactions were further bolstered by redoubling of the selective use of evidence to reinforce the Irishman trope.

In this way, the native-born were able to keep the negative discourse intact through the production of hyperbolic representations of Irish Americans, while simultaneously making certain case-by-case exceptions. When neutral or positive representations of Irish Americans appeared in print or on the stage, the person in question was nearly always a certain Irishman, rather than the archetypal Irishman or Irishmen in general. To alter wholesale the well-developed Irishman trope based on actual interactions would have required the widespread reordering of how the native-born viewed their nation and city, as well as themselves. Society-wide changes in popular perceptions of racial and ethnic identity rarely, if ever, occur quickly.

Given the static nature of native-born opinions of Irish immigrants, the voices of revision were often drowned out by increasingly aggressive attempts to reinforce the negative Irishman trope. These endeavors frequently turned violent on the job, or during political campaigns and elections. Likewise, depictions of Irish immigrants laboring or participating in politics were especially negative.
Two examples show how the treatment of certain prominent Irishmen tended to position them as exceptional, rather than as representative of broader Irish characteristics. Take, for example, the popular treatment of Charles Carroll. As the latest living signer of the Declaration of Independence, Carroll is given high praise despite being “of Irish descent, and of the Catholic persuasion.” In addition to the many accolades and praises bestowed upon him for his political service at the birth of the United States and during its early existence, Carroll is portrayed as distinguished, moral, and of high character. His upright posture indicates his moral strength. His near-stoic face conveys his manly devotion to rationality and mastery over his emotions. His American birth, “landed property,” and “moral bounty” prove he is an exception to the Irish American rule. The most striking aspect of the favorable visual image and textual description is the fact that the newspaper in which it appeared was virulently Whig and often quite nativist.  

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76 *New-York Spectator*, 19 November 1832, Col. A.
Similarly, perhaps the most famous Irish-Catholic temperance reformer in Europe and the United States, Father Theobald Mathew, achieved immense popular praise amongst the native-born, despite his Irish nationality. Laudatory comments bestowed upon him described him as, “the moral regenerator of mankind. Sickness, despair and want vanish magically before him, and his footprints are marked with plenty and cheerfulness.” His portrait bears little resemblance to that of the archetypal Irishman. Despite being a Capuchin Father, he is dressed and posed as an English or American statesman. He is well-postured and bears a manly self-mastery. His invitation to the United States House of Representatives and Zachary Taylor’s
White House provide additional evidence that this Irishman was somehow different than other Irishmen.  

The Great Irish Temperance Reformer.

**The New York Herald, 18 July 1847**

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The native-born frequently championed the recurrent theme that the influx of unskilled Irish laborers acquired employment that native New Yorkers desperately needed. This perception grounded itself in at least partial reality, as many Irish immigrants classified themselves as laborers. Many, before immigrating to New York, practiced subsistence and tenant farming, but upon arrival in the New World, elected to forgo further hardship and the bad memories of the potato blight. Many Irish immigrants found themselves in positions such as general laborers, dockworkers, stonemasons, tailors, shoeworkers, and domestic servants. By 1855, the Irish constituted about half of the working-class in New York City. Wages for laborers in 1832 were about seven shillings a day, six shillings a day in 1840, and eight shillings a day in 1845. Real wages failed to keep pace with rising expenses for many of the working-class.

Since many native-born workers were essentially skilled laborers, the actual threat posed by unskilled Irish immigrant laborers was likely very minimal, however, the willingness of Irish Americans to accept low-paying and strenuous labor posed a Janus-faced challenge to popular perceptions of Irishmen. Visual images of the Irish at work both confronted the native-born as evidence of unmanly acceptance of poorly-paying, degrading toil, as well as served to undermine notions that Irishmen were unwilling and incapable of supporting themselves or their families. Since the evidence gathered by the native-born in face-to-face interactions with the Irish revealed legitimate desires by these immigrants to work and provide for themselves and their families, many native-born observers sought to debase the work performed by Irish Americans as unmanly, degrading, and unnecessarily toilsome.

The perceived undue burden leveled by Irish Americans, portrayed in mass culture, willing to sell their labor at unreasonably low rates on the non-immigrant working-class.
stimulated tensions between the two groups, as well as with the propertied classes when immigrant-backed strikes occurred, overshadowing the Irishman’s ability to be seen as productive and manly which was the product of face-to-face interaction. As the willingness of Irish laborers to accept low wages became seen as an extension of their immoral poverty, immigrants frequently found themselves the target of organized political and labor-oriented campaigns aimed at limiting their competitiveness with the native-born worker. Conflict often turned violent, especially during times of economic recession or when real wages failed to grow. Almost inevitably, the Irish American archetype adopted the theme of cheap laborer, taking work from non-immigrants, even though actual competition between skilled and unskilled was, in most cases, virtually nonexistent.78

The widespread perception, and likely reality, that the Irish proved willing to work for less wages than other men became enshrined in the popular Irish American archetype. The image of Irish-dominated labor proved to be pervasive. Scenes of droves of Irish laborers reiterated the sense that Irish workers flooded the market with readily available, inexpensive labor. As expected, the workers also bear many of the classic archetypal stereotypes, such as a filthy, ragged appearance, as well as, a brute barely human appearance. Depictions of the “hovels” they lived in and worked around also captured other themes of poverty and disease-spreading potential. Likewise, the high degree of shaded and darkly illuminated areas indicates

the criminal and subversive elements of the Irishman. The dangerous elements suggested of Irish Americans became exacerbated when actual conflict arose.\textsuperscript{79}

Cartoons depicting Irish laborers being a nuisance to respectable native-born New Yorkers reinforce the gulf between the laboring Irish Americans and middle-class New York City residents. Rather than portray the Irish workman as a productive contributor to society, he is made into a nuisance. Whether blocking sidewalks with boxes so the industrious native-born cannot pass, or striking them in the neck and back with large boards, the Irish laborer shows little regard for his fellow city dwellers. Not only does this convey buffoonery, it indicates Irish Americans are ill-suited for anything resembling elite life. The Irishman is a shabbily dressed imitation of the well-dressed native-born, connoting that he will never aspire to their level.\textsuperscript{80}


\textsuperscript{80} Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper [New York], 18 December 1855.
Conflict over wages erupted between Irish American laborers and the native-born during the construction of the Croton aqueduct, and was depicted in a visual image of the conflict in the Democratic-leaning *Herald*. The construction occurring in an Irish immigrant section of New York City was both a hygiene and temperance initiative. Many thought that clean water flowing from city water pumps would not only lessen the incidence of cholera and other outbreaks, but also provide a realistic and safe alternative to drinking liquor. Despite the newspaper’s normally charitable depiction of Irish Americans and generally labor-friendly political affiliation, the Irish immigrants depicted appear unusually degraded. News stories and printed images of the mob clearly reflect the Irish American archetype. The Irish rioters barely appear human, especially when juxtaposed with the clearly human faces of the militia sent to dispatch them. Despite the author’s clear mocking distain for both the rioters and soldiers, only the Irish are visually portrayed as nearly inhuman. The laborers dress in rags indicating their poverty and carry a battle flag bearing the emblem of a liquor bottle and drinking glass. More than a subtle implication, it is clear that the labor strike is depicted more as a battle to subvert
both city health and temperance than to earn a living wage. The Irish strikers also brandish weapons, communicating their dangerousness and threat to civil society.\textsuperscript{81}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{The Croton Campaign: List of killed and wounded—The terrible bloodless collision between the Irish with sticks and the soldiers with horses—Great excitement and great folly.}
\end{figure}

Violence, chaos, and destruction characterize the supposed uncontrolled outburst of Irish American rage. Railroad workers, overwhelmingly comprised of Irish immigrants, set fire to buildings and destroy property. A vast sea of Irishmen, swinging clubs and other weapons, attack their native-born coworkers and employers. This violent riot underscores the propensity for conflict between immigrant and nonimmigrant workers. Although this scene could be read as portraying uncontrolled, unmanly behavior on the part of both the Irish and native-born, it appears to be the immigrants who are the cause of the conflict. Violence in the labor market is

\textsuperscript{81} The Morning Herald [New York], 11 April 1840, Iss. 277, Col. B; The Morning Herald [New York], 24 April 1840, Iss. 288, Col. C; The Morning Herald [New York], 07 April 1840, Iss. 273, Col. A., “The Insurrection on the Croton Water Works,” The Morning Herald [New York], 08 April 1840, Iss. 324, Col. F.
merely one consequence of the competition inspired by the torrent of immigration of unskilled Irish workers.82

Labor disputes reflected the anxieties of many New Yorkers, with images of labor interaction generally featuring hyperbolic representations of disruptive Irish American workers. Irishmen, due to their occasional participation in strikes and other labor confrontations, threatened not only the general safety of many New York City residents and general peace, but also the fluctuating economy and social order. Even as the desperate economic times of the 1840s gave way to relative prosperity in the 1850s, Irish immigrants were still perceived as menacing. Some elements of the Irish archetype, although perhaps grounded in the same type of reality as the above representations, also were tied to much deeper antebellum social, cultural, and religious ideas, enhancing the negative image of the Irishman.

The reality that most Irish immigrants came to the United States to escape poverty and were quite willing to work to do so conflicted with the opinions of the Irish circulating in mass culture. Producers of visual images and their audiences reacted with hyperbolic extension of the degraded, unmanly, Irish laborer. The work Irishmen performed was depicted as extremely

82 Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper [New York], 7 March 1857.
toilsome and degrading – in other words, as unmanly. Additionally, the Irishman was painted as increasingly disruptive and violence-prone while at work, adding to common native-born anxieties regarding unskilled Irish immigrant laborers.

Politics

Nineteenth-century New York City’s infamously fractured politics, characterized by notorious machine politics, was viewed by many contemporary observers as nearly hopelessly corrupt. The patronage system became a fixture of fiercely competitive Gotham politics. The major parties of the antebellum period, Whigs and Democrats, vied with each other, smaller parties, and even factions within themselves for control of the city’s government.

As Irish immigrants became nationalized, voted in elections, and were elected to public offices, their activities took on conflicting meanings in the eyes of the native-born. Irish Americans, by acting as responsible citizens and participating in civic exercises, presented clear challenges to widespread notions regarding their incompetence, incompatibility with the practice of democracy, and respectability. When confronting face-to-face interactions at polling places, on political campaigns, and in government with Irish Americans seeking representation and agency in city politics, the native-born adopted and enhanced the trope of the election stealing, vote selling, politically corrupt Irishman.

Instead of being welcomed into New York City’s civic life, Irish Americans became closely associated with the corruption wrought by the city’s, and even national, electoral politics. Irishmen were seen as both the perpetrators of corruption, as well as the tools of crooked politicians. Reports that “voters were driven off and the polling places taken possession by a mob, generally composed of drunken Irishmen, excited to a pitch of uncontrollable fury,”
appeared frequently. Politicians, using the Irishmen’s reputed drunkenness against them, “distributed [whiskey] freely to these men, and the result was that before noon disorder reigned triumphant.” Attendant to nearly every antebellum New York City election was Irish immigrant rioting and violence, according to many native-born commentators.\footnote{\textit{New York Herald}, 09 March 1857, Pg. 8, Col. D.}

As one of the fastest growing segments of New York City’s population, the Irish often found themselves courted by supposedly avaricious politicians. Circumspect manipulation of nationalization and voter registration laws allowed many of these newly immigrated Irish to vote in elections. So, when a ship bearing “135 real [sic] Irish boys” landed in New York’s harbor, the chief port authority might say “Well, boys . . . if you can tune you tongues to cry out, Hurra for Martin Van Buren for next President, you may come ashore.” Van Buren, a New York State native and Democrat, was closely associated by many with machine politics and more radical elements of the Democratic Party which favored working-class interests. Opponents viewed the success of many such candidates as the result of immigrant votes.\footnote{\textit{The Herald} [New York], 29 June 1836, Iss. 94, Col. A.}

Although a number of antebellum politicians had themselves been born British colonial subjects, the appearance of newly immigrated Irish in local elections confounded many native-born New York City residents. The Irish immigrant who departed his immigrant vessel and became an elected official shortly thereafter became incorporated into the Irish American archetype. An Irishman, supposedly endorsing a native-born candidate, stated, “Besides, the native have been for the last thirty years voting for us foreigners, appointing us to office and filling our bellies and clothing our backs with the spoils; now it is but fair that we Irish, Scotch, and English, should now and then, - once in forty years say, - go heart and soul for the natives,
just by way of encouraging them in their own native land.” This bit of satire displays the emergence of the Irish immigrant politicians and recipient corrupt political spoils trope.  

One image from 1843 portrays a disappointed office-seeker, an Irish immigrant, after losing an election. The image appears as if it was out of a nativist newspaper, although it is not. He is obviously poor, ragged, and appears nearly starved to death. His clothes are ripped and his hat smashed. He symbolizes the archetypal Irish immigrant who comes to the United States, and through political corruption, is elected to political office or appointments. Although likely a fictionalized hyperbole, this Irishman represents a dangerous threat to the American republic. His subversion of democratic ideals though political manipulation and corruption make him a source of anxiety for many native-born New Yorkers. Not only is he nearly dead from the starvation conditions from whence he immigrated, he brings political death to the United States. He imports corrupt political practices from Europe, which Americans overthrew in the Revolution.  

85 The Herald [New York], 02 November 1835, Col. A.  
86 New York Herald, 14 June 1843.
The 1838 satirical image of a Locofoco celebration greatly incorporates many of the numerous aspects of the Irish American archetype, another example of native-born attempts to aggressively undermine Irish Americans who might otherwise be seen as active and productive citizens. The figure dancing the “pigeon-wing,” a minstrel dance also closely associated with immigrant and Negro slums, “recently graduated Sing Sing,” the infamous New York penitentiary. Another member of the celebration, “the lady with short petticoats has picked oakum on Blackwell’s Island,” the equally infamous home of another New York penitentiary, work house, and mental hospital. The connection between criminals and the labor-oriented faction of the antebellum Democratic Party connotes the immorality and criminality of their Irish American supporters. The obvious association of the unrestrained comic dancing of New York’s immigrant and Negro slums, as well as the minstrel stage, and the Irishman would also have struck the native-born viewer as especially unmanly. Uncontrolled emotions and physical
actions imply that the dancing Irishman is incapable of self-mastery, the cardinal in flaw in the proper exercise of republican voting.\footnote{Morning Herald [New York], 12 April 1838; Dale Cockrell, Demons and Disorder: Blackface Minstrels and their World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 87.}

\textbf{The Ball}.—\textit{The annexed is a correct representation of the great ball to be given by the locofocos provided Dear Dick Riker is elected:}

The gem'en represented cutting the pigeon-wing, recently graduated at Sing Sing, and the lady with short petticoats has picked oaskum on Blackwell's Island.

\textit{If Dear Dicky should be elected, what fun we shall have!}

\textit{Morning Herald [New York], 12 April 1838}

The representation of the average "election day in New York" features the elements of political corruption levied against Irish immigrants and their political benefactors. In addition to the endless supply of "rum, rows and rioting" the article claims that there are "independent voters for sale[,] . . . smiling, affable candidates" willing to purchase votes, and "gangs of ‘roughs’ and ‘shoulder hitters’" to influence voting. Instead of responsible civic participants, a large diverse crowd appears before voting booths and a sign for a wine-seller. Poor, peasant-
looking voters sell their votes to well-dressed politicians. Another is apparently being attacked and kept from the polling station. While the “well-dressed, quiet and respectable citizens” show up early to vote before heading to work, the unrespectable citizens and immigrants appear later in the day to engage in drunkenness and fraud.\textsuperscript{88}

The corruption supposedly wrought by the massive influx of Irish immigrants into the New York City political system is on display. A caption reads “An Irish Republican taking care that his Friend, Tim Maloney, Votes Early”. Presumably Irish American barefoot children and a wretched woman watch acceptingly the violent corralling of an Irish immigrant vote. The victim, Tim Maloney, is pulled up from the ground as if awoken from a drunken stupor. The entire scene speaks to the supposed widespread inability of Irish Americans to participate in

\textsuperscript{88} Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper [New York], 13 November 1858.
republican government. Due to immoral drunkenness and collusion with corrupt politicians, these immigrants are susceptible to being manipulated, indifferent, or themselves perpetrators.\(^8\)

When images of Irish voters are juxtaposed with those of the native-born the difference is startling. Non-immigrant New Yorkers appear respectably dressed. Even though they appear to be somewhat excited they are still well-restrained. They do not engage in any violence or rioting, no bottles of alcohol appear. Instead of appearing before ramshackle hovels, they stand before a solid large building. They exude manly self-control and financial security. Images such as this reinforced notions of native-born republican fitness, while degrading their opponents.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* [New York], 17 November 1860.  
\(^9\) *Weekly Herald* [New York], 22 March 1845.
As native-born New Yorkers struggled to negotiate the significance of their newly-immigrated Irish-born neighbors, the images produced and circulated in mass culture reflected the varied discourse. Popular opinions were often confounded by face-to-face interactions when native-born and Irish American populations were forced together on the job and at the polls. The result was the production and circulation of visual images which served to undermine the legitimacy of face-to-face interactions which might benefit the Irish American image, aggressively supplanting them with reinforced notions from the negative Irish trope.

While this likely occurred intentionally, especially in the realm of politics, it also, in many cases, occurred as a result of the native-born clinging to those popular discourses which helped them make sense of their daily lives. Although many native-born New Yorkers were skilled craftsmen, they still felt that their jobs were threatened by the presence of numerous unskilled Irish-born workers. While election-day rioting, political corruption, and influence-peddling were certainly political pastimes of Irish immigrants and native-born alike, Irish Americans and their political allies were viewed as the most egregious perpetrators. The native-born wrestled with notions of citizenship, often charging Irish immigrants with unfitness to carry out democratic
action in a republican society. The fact was that for many native-born, it was easier to accept that unmanly Irishmen stole jobs and elections at the expense of the native-born, than to see that the changes, challenges, and hardships in their own lives had more to do with broader social and economic changes, such as urbanization and emerging industrialization, that characterized antebellum New York City and much of the United States.
Conclusion: A Trope Entrenched

It was sailing by dead reckoning to them, and they saw not clearly how to make their port so; therefore, I suppose, they still take life bravely, after their fashion, face to face, giving it tooth and nail, not having skill to split its massive columns with any fine entering wedge, and rout it in detail – thinking to deal with it roughly, as one should handle a thistle. But they fight at an overwhelming disadvantage – living, John Field, alas! Without arithmetic, and failing so.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854

When Henry David Thoreau wrote of his experiences meeting Irish immigrant John Field in *Walden*, he described him as an “honest, hard-working, but shiftless man,” who lived in a rented shanty with a leaky roof, and made a living “bogging.” Although Thoreau claimed to publish his journal largely from his experiences living in a forest home outside of Walden, Massachusetts, he seemingly described the archetypal Irishman when he related his tale of Field. The telltale signs of Field’s Irishness, including his stubborn refusal to improve his situation in life, choosing poverty over common sense and prosperity, highlighted the conflation of situational and elemental qualities of Irish existence. These themes were reified in the popular press and on the minstrel stage during the decades preceding the Civil War, appearing decades later through Thoreau’s pen.91

The Irish trope remains entrenched in popular culture even today. Frank McCourt’s experiences, described in his 1996 memoir, *Angela’s Ashes*, were no different. His father, Malachy, was an alcoholic, who frequently spent his few wages or dole (public assistance) money on alcohol instead of his family. He lived in a Limerick slum, before traveling back to the United States to escape poverty, premature death of his siblings, diseases which included “hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks,” and general

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suffering he experienced. While McCourt’s account was likely based on truth, it resonated with those in the United States and elsewhere so well because it played upon the well-worn Irish trope. McCourt noted that “Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish Childhood.”

The supposed misery of Irish American existence in antebellum New York proved to be a function of the distorting mirror effect produced in mass culture. Events and circumstances of immigrant travel, settlement, and everyday existence were indeed challenging, and often deadly. Anxieties in the native-born about the swells of immigrant settlement, epidemic disease, poverty, drunkenness, violence, prostitution, and labor and political competition fueled an intense interest in Irish immigrant life, specifically gritty and sensational aspects. When the popular press focused in on the hardships of immigrant travel and life they magnified their significance and threat making the problems of Irish American life appear larger and fundamental to the Irish race.

The producers of mass culture, even supporters of the Irish immigrant cause, responded to the demands of their audience to see more of Irish American suffering. Images which were likely not created in an attempt to produce anti-Irish resentment, hostility, or anxiety functioned the same way as those images which were more explicitly critical of Irish immigrants. No matter the producer of the image, whenever an antebellum New Yorker viewed a representation of the Irish in mass culture it nearly always portrayed them as denigrated, suffering, or threatening. The commercial success of antebellum newspapers and minstrel sheet music depended upon their ability to reign in customers. Although the producers of mass culture could certainly interject some degree of personal bias into their pieces, they were still dependent upon the desires of their audiences. They gave their readers and viewers what they demanded – the Irish

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immigrating on cramped vessels, inundating American ports, settling in overcrowded disease-ridden slums, drinking, fighting and rioting, seducing men, taking jobs, and stealing elections. While some or even many Irish immigrants lived in these ways, these representations grew into a primary lens through which all Irishmen were seen.

Many of the situational aspects of Irish American life became reified as fundamental aspects of all Irishmen. Centuries of British oppression, lack of economic development, and potato crop failures ensured most Irish immigrants entering New York’s harbor in the 1840s and 1850s would be struggling economically and suffering from the effects of such. Since the majority of Irish Americans appearing in mass culture representations were shown as poor, immoral, and unmanly, many viewers perceived the Irish race as bearing these same elemental qualities.

Antebellum social segregation ensured that the primary point of interaction between the native-born and their Irish American neighbors was through representations in mass culture, not face-to-face relations. Since a select number of images served as the basis for many native-born opinions of the Irish, these were given enhanced weight and served to reinforce existing and then-forming negative beliefs about Irishmen and Irishwomen. This allowed the archetypal Irishman appearing in mass culture to serve as the scapegoat for larger and unrelated ills of society. The influx and settlement of Irish immigrants could then be attributed to what were the effects of nineteenth-century urbanization and industrialization in general, such as poverty, spread of epidemic disease, drunkenness, crime, violence, prostitution, waves of unemployment and economic instability, and political strife – facts of life in most growing nineteenth-century American cities, whether or not Irish immigrants ever settled there.

The Irishman that native-born New York City residents came to know through mass culture was worse off than other immigrants, a member of a large group of similarly-situated of
his countrymen, filthy, unhygienic, and disease-prone. These new anxiety-producing neighbors threatened to change not only the character and composition of New York City, but also to kill off its residents by spreading European diseases, from which they which they were previously shielded. Cholera and other epidemics were more likely to spill off of immigrant vessels and out of Irish American neighborhoods, sickening city residents. The Irish, because of their poverty, love of slum living, filth, and immorality, were more susceptible to breeding and spreading their diseases, but their proximity to more affluent and moral native-born neighborhoods was also quite threatening. With crowds of immigrants flowing into New York’s harbor weekly, death lived next door.

Equally confounding to many of New York City’s native-born population was the proposition that the immoral, and unmanly or unwomanly traits of Irish Americans would dilute and distort the native-born character. Irish immigrants, seen as fundamentally poor, drunken, violent, and otherwise morally fallen, threatened to pass these same traits to the native-born through their shared environment. Unmanly Irishmen and unwomanly Irishwomen, many native-born thought, would make their neighbors much like them by creating an environment of degradation and immorality which would alter the nature of the native-born.

Irish immigrants were viewed through the same gendered lens as their native-born counterparts, their differences attributed to unmanliness or unwomanliness. Irishmen, seen as fundamentally impoverished, could not care for their families, and therefore could not be adequate heads-of-household. Likewise, Irishmen unable to control their consumption of alcohol or rage failed at the task of self-mastery. Irish immigrants could not care for their families or even themselves. The result was that inherently moral Irish American women became fallen seducers of native-born men. The Irish of New York City forced their native-born
neighbors to support them financially in city poorhouses, guard themselves against drunken and violent thugs, and resist sexual temptations of Irishwomen in the public sphere.

Occasionally Irish Americans and the native-born engaged in face-to-face interaction, typically at work or in the political arena. Not surprisingly, face-to-face interaction with Irishmen confounded popular opinions constructed and disseminated in mass culture. Those Irish Americans who did not fit neatly into the mold of the Irish archetype were seen as fundamentally different from their fellow countrymen, given exceptional status by their native-born observers.

Heated and often violent clashes took place on the job and in politics between the native-born and Irish Americans – the same theaters where face-to-face interaction was likely to occur. Amidst charges of job stealing, labor rioting, and election stealing, the native-born fought most vigorously to force the archetypal Irishman trope upon the Irish immigrants and observers of mass culture. When the native-born’s assumptions regarding Irish Americans were challenged, many New Yorkers redoubled their efforts to hem their immigrant neighbors into the tightly-fitting archetype which also explained many of New York’s social, moral, and economic ills. To do this, their depictions of the Irish became increasingly threatening to the native-born. In so doing they were able to continue to rely upon the Irish American trope established in mass culture.

This Irishman and Irishwoman, as they appeared in mass culture, became so deeply ingrained into the native-born consciousness that they endured decades after the initial stimulations for impoverished and starving Irish masses to immigrate subsided. Although many thought that Irish American participation in the Civil War would lead to some catharsis, it did not. The continuation of the Irishman archetype prevailed during and for many decades following the war.
The infamous draft riots of 1863, which were inspired by the start of the federal conscription of New York City residents to fight the Civil War, brought into conflict working-class Democrats, many of whom were Irish American, and much of the city’s native-born population. The violence and destruction began after disgruntled and often poor working-class Democrats witnessed the first names publicly drawn for conscription at a local draft office. Those in the pool of names, many believed, were disproportionately poor, Democrat, and immigrant. Although drafted citizens could purchase their way out of the draft for three-hundred dollars, this sum was too great for most of New York City’s laboring class. Many of those who could not purchase their freedom from army conscription seized a local draft office and burned the building, and much of the block on which it stood, to the ground. Rioting continued for several days with political proponents of the draft and Republican Party drawing attacks, as well as a number of the city’s Negro population.  

Similarly, the New York City Orange Riots in 1870 and 1871 pitted many of the city’s working-class Irishmen against their elite native-born neighbors. The Orangemen, an organization which paraded twice to celebrate a fifteenth-century British victory, provided the impetus for provoking Irish Americans to riot. Also partially coinciding with the exposés that eventually helped bring down the “Boss’ Tweed Democratic political machine, the riots divided New York between native-born and Irish American, as well as middle- and upper-class against working-class. Estimates placed the loss of life at sixty, with hundreds more injured, in addition to extensive property damage. Irish immigrants saw the Orangemen celebrations as a

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celebration and extension of the oppression they faced at the hands of the British while living in Ireland.  

Other examples of the continued Irish immigrant threat abounded into the late nineteenth-century. The immigrant vessel remained a powerful symbol for the danger the Irish posed to the native-born. Newsprint’s continued treatment and frequent reporting on the harsh conditions of immigrant travel and life further perpetuated the image of the Irish American as diseased and disease-bearing. An 1883 depiction of the Irish immigrant portrayed him traveling aboard a British vessel draped in cloth bearing the inscription Cholera. The immigrant appeared as mere bones and skin with a skeleton’s face and scythe, most likely drawing the not-too-subtle connotative connection to the Grim Reaper and death. The cartoon’s caption read, “The kind of ‘Assisted Immigrant’ we cannot afford to admit.” This image is strong evidence for the staying power of the disease spreading Irishman.

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95 *Anti-immigration Cartoon Showing the Arrival of Cholera in New York, 1883.*
With the close of the Civil War, European immigration resumed to prewar rates, with an increasingly diverse immigrant cross section entering the country, spreading anti-immigrant sentiments to other ethnicities. The federal government and a variety of states encouraged immigration to help fill the increasing need for labor and economic development. Nativism, however, did not die. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s Chinese immigrants were subjected to violent attacks and deportation, and vilification in newsprint and popular culture. Elements of anti-Irish nativism remained in the minds of many Americans and found frequent expression in the popular culture. Once again, stimulated by reports of political corruption, temperance movement ideals, explosive nationalism, fear of subversive political thought, and economic
recession, Irish Americans and other immigrants met with public rage in the 1880s and 1890s, renewing the old archetype of immoral subversive immigrant.\(^96\)

As southern and eastern Europeans increased their numbers in the United States, attempts aimed at reducing immigration characterized the first several decades of the twentieth century. Passing a literacy test and placing restrictive quotas on immigration in the 1920s, the Federal government effectively slowed the influx of certain undesirable immigrant groups. The latter half of the twentieth century into present day has witnessed the influx of immigrants from all over the world, in particular, from third world nations of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. These groups meet with occasional hostility from anti-immigrant American citizens, states, and the federal government. African, Asian, and Latin American immigrants meet with already established archetypal images, which they must struggle to shake free.\(^97\)

The Irish American archetype created in mass culture visual representations in the decades preceding the Civil War mirrored and contributed to the growth of nativistic sentiments from the 1830s through the 1850s. Depictions in the popular press, such as impoverished immigrants entering the country, due to their widespread distribution resulted in the standardization of the Irish immigrant archetype. Upon the foundations of massive immigration, disease, poverty, drunkenness, prostitution, labor conflict, and political tension, an increasingly caricatured version of Irish Americans emerged. Denotative meanings of poverty, drunkenness, and violence within the Irishman’s image became nearly indiscernible from connotative nineteenth-century moral standards and family-social gender roles. Mass culture was the vehicle for the reproduction and distorted recreation of the Irish American archetype,


\(^97\) Reimers, *Unwelcome Strangers*, 152.
evolving out of seemingly neutral factual renderings, to reproduction of stereotypical
generalizations and exaggerations played out in cartoons and the minstrel stage.

As native-born New Yorkers struggled to cope with massive economic, social, and
cultural changes in their city they also confronted new, large, and unfamiliar groups of foreign-
born immigrants. Many of the native-born population expressed dissatisfaction with their new
neighbors for a variety of reasons. These grievances were reflected mass culture. As consumers
of the press and minstrelsy, many New York residents expressed their approval or disapproval of
elements of the Irish immigrant image by purchasing or not purchasing newspapers and
attending or not attending minstrel performances. Successful newprint and minstrel
representations of Irishmen were thus selected, exaggerated, and reproduced for further sale or
performance. The popular press and minstrel performance acted as distorting mirrors which
reflected popular opinion while at the same time distorting it.

Many native-born New Yorkers built their understanding of their new Irish-born
neighbors upon these images appearing in mass culture instead of upon face-to-face
interactions. The generalizations found in mass cultural depictions of Irish Americans were
given enhanced weight by their viewers. This fact was further bolstered by the social
segregation that existed in antebellum New York City. When face-to-face interaction occurred
which confounded the Irish American archetype exceptions were made for specific individuals
rather than adjustments to the well-established trope. Selectively weighting images of Irish
immigrants allowed for the common negative situational attributes of Irish American immigrant
life to become reified as essential qualities of the Irish nature.
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